

Amstrad 128K Microcomputer (v3)

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BASIC 1.1

Ready

Saul Elijah

Syntax error

Ready

EPIC FAIL.....■

EPIC FAIL.....

Saul Elijah

This book is dedicated to Alex Marchant, the friend I had but didn't
deserve.

Where to start? Well, in the beginning I suppose. This is not an
instruction manual to those who want to get weird. This is a lament,
from someone odd.

Childhood and Early School

I was born premature by about a month. Mum tried for 12 years to get pregnant, and no one thought she could. I was a little scrawny yellow thing. Only about 4 pounds.

I think mum's first memory of me was when she came to see me, and I had a big poop coming out of my backside. Not the best first impression.

Mum only ever wanted to be a parent. My dad didn't care, he showed no emotion when mum told him she was finally pregnant.

There was something wrong with dad. But I am his son, and whatever it was I have it, as I am not remotely interested in being a parent. Which is good, as no one would want me anyway. I was born in Sheffield. So technically that makes me a Yorkshireman, but like my parents I do not have an accent. And we moved away from Sheffield when I was still very young.

I'd like to claim my birth right as a Yorkshireman, even though I don't sound northern. Yorkshire has some of the most beautiful parts of the country in it. It's just a bit cold, and it rains a lot.

The reason we were in Sheffield was because my dad was based there for work. He worked for Volvo cars. He had progressed in his career. Mum thought the only reason he wanted to become a father is that his peers at work kept talking about their children, and he felt left out. Little did he know that I was to have so many issues, and me being the dunce at school, well. He rejected me. Not much to

talk about with his mates.

We moved with dad's job from Sheffield to Felixstowe. We were in a house, just down by the sea, on Russell Road. Right on the corner at the start of the road. Our yard opened onto the adjacent road. At the other end of Russell Rd. There was the beach. Also, a play area for children, I remember windy cold days walking by the beach, looking at all the pebbles.

Dad used to pick pebbles to take back to his polishing machine, and shine them up, they did look very pretty. I can remember a large wheel, that you could run in, and it would turn like a hamster wheel. And I remember falling in it and chafing my legs when wearing my shorts. I remember learning to ride a bike by the sea in Felixstowe, for once my dad actually had patience with me, and I had none. I threw fits of temper when I kept failing to ride the bike. But I eventually got it.

I liked this house; I liked the layout. I liked that I had so much room. I can remember the kitchen; it was quite slim. An area at the back of it where the washing machine was. Then along the wall there was a dining table, opposite the kitchen tops. It was slim in there, as you came from the house into the kitchen, to your left there was the door out to the yard. I used to play out there. I can remember sitting at the kitchen table with dad trying to teach me the alphabet, of course I couldn't learn it and he just used to get cross with me.

As the house was large, later while we were there, my nanny on dad's side came to live with us. She needed extra care and other family members either could not help or did not want to. We were there a while before granny came to live with us. I don't remember much of her unfortunately, I do remember she struggled with depression, and back in those days, it was less well known. Mum

did an amazing job of dealing with me and all my problems and on top of it all caring for granny. My dad gave up on his mum, he said she's not my mother anymore. So, mum looked after her.

Granny was kind and lovely, you would look after her. Her maiden name was Butler, she was Irish. I understand the Butlers had something to do with the castles in Ireland. Her and dad's dad worked in the USA for a while, they were chief cooks for large wealthy families, I can remember granny's madeira cakes now, they were so delicious. She used to sit mixing them for ages. I used to dip my finger in the bowl to taste it. I don't remember my grandad on dad's side, he died when I was very young. A factory worker later in life back in England. You could hear him coming home apparently, the clogs on the cobbles.

I really liked being on Russell Road. I had a friend Tracy, who lived just a few doors down. And we were together a lot. Riding bikes around the block and playing on Tracey's Commodore 64, I can remember 'Fire Ant'.

Felixstowe was also my earliest memories of school. I had been identified as struggling even at primary school, now we had moved to our new area my parents thought I might benefit from extra attention, so they put me in a local private school. As it turned out, I got no more educational attention at this school and I was still struggling far too much, my teacher, after some time there, told my parents basically that they were wasting their money.

Tracey was not at my school. But I did make friends, the other kids there were nice. I had no problem with them. But the school was strict. We had prefects. And discipline. I can remember one quiet reading period after lunch. I was reading a comic and it made me laugh. The prefect that was watching us during the quiet reading,

shouted at me. Then he practically dragged me off to the headmaster who gave me a good telling off in front of his class. He used to speak with his eyes closed, very strange man. Fond of giving you the ruler, or slipper. Much later we were to find out he was wanted in Australia for child molestation. At this point I was not aware. Thank God, he only ever hit me with a ruler.

There was a nice boy at this school called Martin. I can remember he unfortunately had a lot of warts on his fingers. I was sat by him in class one day, it was the headmaster's class. I always used to be fearful of him. Martin was very quiet, not normal. Later I was to learn that the headmaster had made him stay overnight as punishment, and apparently Martin had left the fridge door open and got into trouble. I wonder what other trouble Martin got into on that night with the headmaster.

My teacher at this school was a nice lady. And it was her that talked to my parents and told them that I was not progressing, and it was not worth me staying there.

Initially I was relieved to be going to a 'normal' school, I had nice friends at the private school, something I never had at the 'normal' school. But the normal school was much more relaxed, I was not scared to be there.

Even at this stage the teachers had just about given up on me. They must have heard from the private school that I was not getting on well. Grange Primary was a lot bigger than my private school. The playing fields were huge, you didn't have time to walk them all at break time. I don't remember having any friends at Grange Primary.

Even then I was an outcast. An odd boy. At the time I had moved on to Grange Primary we had moved into a different house in

Felixstowe. This time we were on a modern estate, with a gravel drive and two garages out front. A much more modern build, a nice big house with lots of space and a lovely large garden. Which to be fair to dad, he did keep in very good condition.

I had moved away from Tracey, but we still saw each other. I had a knack of making friends with my neighbour's kids. This time, right next door to me, was a lady called Lorraine. With her husband, the truck driver, Stuart. Not sure if that is the correct spelling of his name. Lorraine had three kids, Emma, Bobby, and the youngest Amy. They were my new friends.

Occasionally I might socialise with someone from my school, but it never went anywhere. This was the first time I was bullied. Some of the older kids were just not very nice. Me being the dunce and a bit odd, I got picked on often. I can remember once getting into a fight with one of them, it never really went anywhere. We were very young. I think I stood my ground.

I can remember one of our male teachers, with a moustache, was trying to teach me some basic maths and asking me questions in front of the class, I always hated that. Of course, I could not give him the answer, so he yelled at me so fiercely I started to cry. I was very upset. The next day he had calmed down, and he did apologise to me.

I remember one day in our large assembly hall; we had the Green Cross Code man come to teach us about road crossing safety. One of the other kids said he was the same man that played Darth Vader, I was not sure if I believed this. We also once celebrated harvest festival, and there was a table replete with all sorts of strange breads. I got some bread, even though I had either not brought anything, or not brought much. However, I didn't feel I

deserved the bread, and I was very happy with it.

On one occasion, in our assembly, I got called out to the side door by someone. I now think it was an educational psychologist. But it was just some bloke when I was a kid. He was nice, asked a lot of questions, I tried my best. He seemed to think I was not thick, but I had a sequential block. I currently think of this as dyscalculia, but they may not have known about it then. This was probably late 70's.

Unfortunately, the fact that apparently, I was not thick did not get back to the teachers or my fellow classmates. And the teaching didn't change when they knew I had problems, it all just carried on as per normal.

I remember the road we were on in this second area of Felixstowe; I always thought it was called Cavendish Court. I loved this house; it was modern and light. I liked the layout, and it was very light, the windows let a lot of natural daylight in. I loved the patio, and tidy and large garden. We used to have little parties for us kids in one of the garages now and then. Get a table, and some food, and we were happy.

It was easy to play outside our houses as it was one large gravel drive, long way down to the actual road. We took our bikes, and even my go kart out to the main road off the gravel as it was a large hill, perfect for going down to get speed. I never really got on with my go kart, I preferred my bike.

So, one day, I asked mum if Bobby next door would like to swap it for his Star Wars collection, he agreed. So, I inherited a very large collection of Star Wars toys, including the Falcon. I was very happy with this, and if I still had it now it might be worth money. I have no idea what happened to it all.

There was a new construction area just over the road, the main road on the other side of the property. Lots of building work going on over there, we used to run over the main road and go explore it. Lots of fun to a kid's mind. I can remember once one of the older kids coming over there with me, and for some reason asking me to lift my t shirt and he touched me. I can remember being a bit confused by this, so tried to avoid him in the future.

On a building site a bit closer to home I found some perfectly formed stones laying around. They were not like any stones I had ever seen, and I was convinced it was the work of aliens.

Dad and his work.

For me this was the third time I had moved. The second house, the modern house, in Felixstowe was my favourite house. So big and light. And in a nice position. I have nice childhood memories, even if school was horrid for me. And I didn't have lots of friends. But I had enough. Dad kept progressing with work, he was doing well with that. Dad was never a father, and he was a terrible husband. But he did work well.

I can remember travelling away with my parents with work things, holidays for me, but probably conferences or awards for dad. I remember going somewhere once, I was having a lovely time, and getting on well with a couple of one of dad's co-workers children. We were having fun. Then I went off somewhere with them and the mother. We were in a lift at a hotel, I can't remember really what was going on, but I must have said something.

She looked at me and said something like, 'stupid boy'. Totally dismissed me. I felt hurt, I thought they were nice people. My mood was not so great after that. I can't remember what I did wrong, but I was always the stupid boy.

We went to Sweden once. Dad worked for Volvo Cars, a Swedish company at that time. One night while mum and dad were at a 'function'. I had a babysitter in the hotel room, she was awesome. She was happy and fun, and she took me on a trip of the hotels lower quarters that guests would never see.

I saw the changing rooms and got a look at the kitchen. Big kitchen.

That was so much fun. For me at my age, it was a real adventure. I will never forget her. I have always gotten on better with women rather than men. Most of my close friends growing up were girls. Even though I was supposed to be the stupid one, most of the boys at my school were thick.

I have a long history of memories of dad coming home in his company car, a Volvo, which would change often. I loved Volvos because dad said they were the safest cars on the road and that was important. They were distinctive looking, and he kept coming home in a different one, different spec, different colour. I used to sit in the driver's seat and pretend to drive like it was the car from Knight Rider. Of course, Volvo's look rather different to the Pontiac. But I had fun.

Because of this history and experience I have very fond feelings for Volvo's. I look back now with nostalgia at the eras of Volvo's from when dad worked for them. Lots of nice cars. My personal favourite being the 480 Turbo. Dad used to come home in them often. I just thought it was the coolest car in the world, well apart from Knight Rider.

Mum and dad even got to go to Disney World for some do. Unfortunately, no children were allowed. So, I had to stay somewhere else, being babysat. I was quite disappointed with that.

I can remember as a child that we stayed in some very upmarket hotels, which was very exciting. Great fun. One had a pool that you could just walk into, and in the middle, there were seats, stools really, in the water. Surrounding a bar. So, there I was sitting in the pool, in my swimming trunks with dad, ordering drinks at the bar!

We flew over to Ireland once, some works do. On the plane over

there someone just in front of us had suggested there was a problem. We asked him about it, and he said he was a pilot, and something was not right. The next thing we knew the oxygen masks had dropped from the ceiling and we were being told to put them on.

I was very scared and in tears and mum was trying to comfort me, I just remember dad complaining to the air hostess that the mask didn't work! We descended quickly to the nearest airport, not where we were supposed to be, but we just had to get down. As it turned out I think we had a problem with cabin pressure and were low on oxygen.

We landed and I remember them putting on sandwiches for us. I was not hungry, but I understand fear can make you hungry. I saw Wendy Richard there, she was dressed in black, but my dad pushed me to get her autograph. She played Pauline Fowler in the soap opera Eastenders. I felt bad about bothering her, she must have been going to a funeral. But she signed my book.

I remember the people we visited in Ireland. They had a 480. The man's wife used to be a rally driver, and she drove us somewhere and it was awesome. Such command of the car. So much fun.

Later childhood/teens -

Towards the last period of living in the modern house in Felixstowe mum and dad had bought a holiday home in a seaside town in Somerset. We used to go over to see dad's friend, who was in the building trade, working on it. Once it was finished, we used to go and stay in it. It was right opposite the harbour, and I loved to be near the sea.

The area is quite pretty. And more aesthetically pleasing than where we were. One time when we were back in Felixstowe dad asked me 'how would you like to go and live there?'. Thinking of being right by the sea, I said I would like it. So, we moved.

Up until now the company had been paying the rent on the property we had lived in, and we had moved a fair few times. Dad moved even more than us as he had his own place at one point. This time, we had bought the property, we owned it and had done it up. Dad had been placed at a dealership in Bristol. For him it was a daily commute.

Early years here were innocent enough, I had made some friends at school. I never seemed to keep friends for very long, but you grow and change as a child. For a while it was very nice. Of course, the previous school had likely informed the current school that the boy was a dunce. There was no hope for me. In fact, at one point, they tried to put me in a class with a bunch of people with Downs syndrome. Now, no offence is meant here. But I was not retarded, it felt very wrong. I knew I was perfectly bright. So, I rejected it.

I could never understand why I could not do the 'school' stuff, but when I shared time with the other kids at school, for the most part they were daft. But it was me with the label. Me in the stupid groups.

I can remember the very first day I went to school, I mean, in the very beginning. I came home and mum said, how did it go? I said I didn't like it so don't want to go back. It was at that point she had to break the news to me that I had no choice, I had to go to school.

My seaside town is a very pretty place. With lots to enjoy. And I was one of the privileged one's owing to dad's position, and of course where we lived. Across from us was the harbour. Just down the road was a lovely walk that took you along the sea, then up onto the hill, where there was a lot of room to explore. I used to very much enjoy going up there.

My childhood time was mostly innocent. At this point we were in the 80's. Even though I didn't have a father, the man who was supposed to be my father, did a good job. So, I had nice things. Starting in Felixstowe I had been given a computer. The doctor had said it might improve my co-ordination.

My first computer was an Amstrad CPC 6128. It was actually pretty much bought just to play games on. To start with I remember thinking, I don't need it. I was not sure I even wanted it; at that time I didn't really know anything about computers. But then I started playing games. The first game I played was 3D Stunt Rider, where you had to jump your stunt bike over the busses and land it safely.

Well, it was a hoot. I was hooked. This was the start of a love affair with computers that I still have today. I'm not sure if it's something to do with being autistic? I love computers.

And if you are going to grow up in a period for computers, the 80's was great. The Amstrad was one of the popular 8-bit systems of the time, the other contenders were the Spectrum, and the Commodore 64. Both great in their own right, arguably the Commodore was a bit better than the Amstrad.

But the Amstrad had better colours. The speccy, was the cheapest option, and had slightly less impressive graphics. But often much better games. And much more support.

In Somerset I still had my Amstrad and amassed quite a few tape games by now. Other people I knew had varieties of the other systems. Computers were everywhere. It was great.

Me being me, even though I loved the games, I was very rubbish at them. And no, the computer games did not improve my co-ordination. Probably as I am likely to have dyspraxia.

I remained an outcast at school, but managed to make friends by making people laugh. I always had a sense of humour. I never had lots of friends.

Somehow, and I don't remember how. But I befriended a boy called David. At this point I had next to no contact with previous friends, I think I only knew one other person. There was something about David, he wasn't like the other kids. And I think that's what attracted me to him. I had been the odd one out for my whole life, perhaps I need to find people like me?

David had problems. But I still liked him. In the end our friendship waned, and I made my choice, I didn't want to know him anymore. I needed to move on. I felt bad about this. As he, like me, was an odd boy. I don't think he really had anyone else. But David, over the time

I knew him, had pushed my limits a bit too much.

I can remember telling him I don't feel like hanging out on a few occasions, only to be greeted by him on his bike, who had cycled down from his house, outside my window, shouting at me. He would not be ignored.

There was a dark side to David, and I found that appealing. As I was getting older, as a very young teen. I had discovered that I have a dark side too. I'd always been such a nice boy. But then I became a teenager.

It was the 80's, horror movies were very popular. Of course, they were for the over 18 adults, but there was a little corner shop video store where David lived, and they would rent them out and not care about our age. So probably at about 11 or 12 years old, David and I used to enjoy a steady diet of A Nightmare On Elm Street. Or, Friday the 13th. Well, to us, then, they were scary, but we loved it.

I remember watching A Nightmare On Elm St. On my own. And having a hard time understanding it was just a movie. I thought Freddie could come into my dreams too. Frightening, but thrilling.

David and I got into the whole horror movie thing, we used to look at the Fangoria magazine. And even tried our hand at our own latex make up, which we were not very good at.

You might wonder, where were the parents? Well David had some bloke just up the road from him, who was friendly with his mother. He had befriended David and let him into his house with his own key when he wanted. He was usually out, at work. So, we could watch without being interrupted and make as much noise as we wanted.

There was always something a little off about the relationship between David and this bloke, I never put two and two together at the time. But I now suspect he was abusing David. And I think David was not happy that I didn't notice. I could be wrong, but I remember an article in the local paper years later. I think I'm right, I never managed to help David. I never knew he had such problems, I was young, and despite not being stupid, I perhaps was not very bright either.

At this bloke's house, David and I were fond of putting things in the microwave. Sweets mostly, which we liked. But I think David put a slug in it once. Horrid to think of now.

There was also a time when, and I can't boast too much intelligence here, David said this bloke didn't need the equipment in his shed anymore so we could smash it all up. Stupidly I believed him, so even hard hats got smashed, somehow. Of course, once the bloke found out his gear had been trashed, he came to my dad, explaining the situation, and expecting money. My dad refused.

I really should have known at this point that the relationship was not OK. But for someone who is not necessarily stupid, I can be very stupid.

David and I, along with his mum, who was separated from David's dad, who I believe was in New Zealand. And this bloke, well. We all went on holiday.

David had a caravan that we often slept in for the fun of it. We took the caravan and drove to Alton Towers. But we had someone else with us. David's sister had been given leave from the local mental hospital where she was staying on a permanent basis to come with us. She seemed ok, to me. At that age. But obviously was not ok. I

do remember her plucking hairs out of my leg while I was wearing shorts in the car on the way there.

Even though we were an odd bunch, David and I had a good time. We stayed in a couple of campsites on the way there. I can remember having an allowance from my mum that I could spend on what I wanted. At this point and at our age, digital watches had a strange allure to us. I think we bought a couple of simple Casio's. But we were happy.

Once we finally got there, well. It seemed huge. It was the stuff of dreams. I remember eating American doughnuts hot for the first time, nothing finer had I tasted. And I got an ice cream which was like £5 I think, one giant edible cone, filled with about three flavours.

And the rides! Beyond my imagination. Very scary, and lots of fun. I remember one roller coaster where you get your photo taken on the way down. You can buy it at the end to see your face and how scared you were. I was very scared. And that bloke was holding David a bit too tight.

I didn't progress at school; I just sort of existed. And I had existed long enough to go to the big school. This is where the trouble starts. It was here that I finally broke up with David. I had moved on. But me being me, I didn't really have many friends. Who wants to be friends with the dunce?

I had found a group of people who were into things I thought were fun, so I paid some attention to them. These were more problematic people, not the nice boy's I used to know. I changed very much being a teenager. The reality of adulthood was very much on my mind. All this time I had been the reject and failure. And soon, I would be released from my school prison, into the real world. And

exactly what was I supposed to do?

The kids I got with were into skateboarding, and music you can't find in Woolworths. I thought that was fun. So, I went along for the ride.

I think I was about 15 when I first got someone to buy tobacco for me. I can remember finding it just about impossible to make a roll up cigarette. But practise paid off. My first roll up made me feel physically sick. And dizzy, and lightheaded. I tried to be cool and play it off. But I felt horrid. With this new group also came drugs.

And if I wanted to fit in and smoke pot, then I needed to smoke first. So, I persevered with the roll ups. Now it's not the fault of the people I was with, this was my own choice. My own very bad decision. Simply because I had that dark side, and I was a teenager.

Let's face it, exactly what future did I have? I was going nowhere, so I thought self-destruction was kinda noble. And besides, it might be fun.

There were times when it was fun, lots of fun. But there were times also when things went a bit wrong, and no that was not fun.

During this tender time of youth, I had decided that I was a hippy. Despite my father being a business manager, wearing a suit, driving a Volvo, and voting Conservative. Of course, because I was a reject, I had to be a rebel. I also had long hair, funny trousers. German army jacket, Doc Martens. Yeah. I looked the part.

One thing I don't regret about this period was the music. I could have left the daft smoking and drugs, no matter how much fun I had, it was a big dumb risk. But the music, I still listen to it today.

Yes, it has its nostalgic appeal to me, but I genuinely love the music.

Early in this period I had befriended, unwisely, some bloke I will refer to simply as old smokey. I remember the first time I met him. I was in a design class; you know the practical woodwork thing. I was sat at a table with him and someone else. The other person I was not interested in, but there was something about old smokey.

He had a very independent air about him, he didn't need us to like him. I knew he was into computer games, so I started a conversation with him. He was very reluctant to talk to me to start with, but I persisted. I was curious.

Have you played 'such and such'? No. Oh, what have you got then? He had an Atari ST, which was very popular back then. I suggested swapping some of the console games, or something. And he started to talk to me. This was the beginning.

We ended up hanging out most of the time. Computers and computer games were a big thing for us. He was very geeky, he read all the computer magazines, and remembered all the details. I read the occasional magazine but was not so hot on the details.

We started being friends when we were probably about 14. Innocent enough computer stuff to start with. He was quite a cold character. Not the warmest of people, very independent. But also, very entertaining. I had never, even with David, met anyone like old smokey. I used to go over to his house and stay over, he used to come over to mine and stay over. When I went to his house, his father was usually away working, which left old smokey at home with his brother and sister and his mum.

Who was one of the strangest people I have ever known. Not

pleasant, not friendly. Not nice. Not even paying much attention to her own kids. She pretty much sat on a sofa, drank wine and watched TV.

Of course, she would also have a good go at old smokey, he got it in the neck a fair few times. But mostly she just ignored everyone.

I remember when we were very young, before the smoking and drugs. We bought a lot of fizzy drinks, with all the sugar in them. And drank too much. The sugar went to our heads, and we were making ridiculous noises, then all of a sudden, his mum shouted, 'stop yipping!' Well, we had never heard of the phrase 'yipping' before and we were absolutely in stitches laughing at this telling off.

Old smokey and I also had a talent for burping. We could make ourselves do it on command, and they were not small belches. These were lung rippers. His older brother owned a computer store in our town and old smokey was working there one day while I was with him.

We had gone out into the alleyway for a break and started with the loud burping. We decided it would be funny to do it at someone, so we waited for someone to walk past the alleyway, built up a good one. Then let rip. Both of us, very loud burps, several, not one. It was hideous.

The innocent person walking by didn't stop to see if we were all right, she just walked on, a bit more quickly.

We started smoking together. But we were too young at about 15 to go buy tobacco, so had to get others to get it. I felt quite rich with my half an ounce of Golden Virginia. It always, at that point, made me feel sick. But I persevered. I had to make joints you see, you need to

practise.

Both my parent's smoked, so I didn't feel like I was so bad doing it. To start with I didn't do it often, but in time I became a regular smoker. And I was quite a heavy smoker. Even without the dope.

We knew the right people. We could get drugs. Someone could get them for us. We just needed to pay the money. And we didn't have a lot of money back then. One 'teenth' of pot was about £7.50, but it didn't last long. Sometimes we just used to hang around the amusement arcades and bother people in there that looked, well, trouble. They would go get us drugs.

So, it started with pot. Spliffs, and later, homemade bongos. Many escapades up the hill, with a teenth and a water bottle converted to a bong. But there were more drugs. At school they handed out anti-drug leaflets, with names and details and pictures. A veritable shopping list.

I had heard some amazing things about LSD. Someone once told me that the lamp posts bend down and talk to you. Well, they don't. Not for me anyway. I never really hallucinated on it, I just laughed and laughed until it hurt. Do I regret drugs now? Yeah, I do really. I think I should have been more sensible. But did I have fun with drugs, well if you want me to be honest, and believe it or not I am honest. Yes, the good times were good.

There were plenty of drugs, but I would not say we were, in general, excessive. I knew people much more excessive than I was. But for a period, old smokey and I did LSD once a week for the summer.

There were many adventures. What you tend to notice once you've dropped LSD, if it's indeed genuine. And I've had my fair share of

fake acid. Burned by the unscrupulous. Is you get a kind of almost electric rush, up the back of the spine. It makes you shudder. It's a pleasant feeling, not unpleasant.

The next part is that if you look at the eyes, the pupils are huge. Not normal. Now you know you are 'coming up'. Soon the first phases of being high will be on you, and you never really know just how strong the LSD will be. It's at this point, you might want to get out of your bedroom in your parents' house and go for a stomp.

We walked miles while high. Walking from the town to another very picturesque place about 4 miles or so down the main road. Once the trip is in full swing, you'll likely feel overpowering euphoria. Simply put you are very happy.

And suddenly, everything is funny. You will grin and laugh like never before. Things that would not normally be funny, are. I remember going for a long walk once with old smokey and we saw something in the hedge, some object.

We were probably about three miles from the town and low and behold there in the centre of the hedge was a fish and chip wrapper. Which was odd on its own, but once we opened it up to inspect it, we found a perfectly intact fish skeleton. Of course, this was just a bit too much for us and we nearly pooped laughing at it.

I can remember walking down the main high street, with no shoes or socks on at about 2am.

One of the people who we knew back then, who was a very mellow chap. Once took us somewhere we had not explored. We were all on acid and went and got some Chinese food. Then he took us just around the back of the shop to a place I had never been in all the

time I was there.

It was a set of retirement flats. And they were all tiny and lit up like Christmas trees. And there were little bridges to them, and flowers everywhere. It was like we'd entered Hobbiton. We had to be careful to not make too much noise, or we would get in trouble. But holding in the amazement was not easy.

Amphetamines were common too. The poor man's Cocaine. About a tenner for a wrap. Snort that stuff up. Well.

More euphoria, and the feeling of having all the energy in the world. A powerful high. Not funny like LSD, a very different experience. But this is high. I've done Cocaine just a couple of times, if I remember rightly back then it was more like £50 for a wrap, we didn't have that kind of money.

Of course, with speed you are full on for hours. High as a kite. Most of the time you'd take the drugs in the evening. And this would mean no sleep all night. The trouble with speed is in the morning once it has just about all run out of the system, you get a hangover from how much energy you've spent the night before. You've been absolutely flying all night and once it runs out, you feel very rubbish. This is something that, if you are casual, you don't get as much with cocaine. The tiredness is extreme.

I used to smoke quite a bit of dope, but the funny thing is I don't think I ever really enjoyed it. I'm certain sometimes it was ok, but mostly for me, I did a lot out of habit.

My favourite of all the drugs I experience has to be magic mushrooms. Yes, LSD is kind of funny, but with shrooms you know you are getting something natural. Not some underground chemist's

idea of LSD, but nature's idea of LSD.

They are also inexpensive. But it's the finding them, identifying them. We were inexperienced and had to rely on others to get them. You can pick them and eat them as they are, or you can dry them and make a tea.

Somerset College of Arts and Technology –

When I finally left school, age 16. I was faced with the dilemma of joining the adult world, the working world. I did not feel like an adult, and I was painfully shy. I had no idea what I could do for work. Work would be a real shock to me. I wanted really to carry on in education, but how? I had one GCSE. I got a grade C in English, all the rest I failed. What college would have me?

The closest college was in Taunton, the Somerset College of Art's and Technology. As it was then. Or SCAT for short. Don't Google that.

As I loved computers, I had found a very basic IT course, nothing else really interested me, but with no qualifications, would they let me, do it? I went for an interview, did my best, apologised for the lack of GCSE's and they recommended the basic entry level course, but said if I applied I could do it.

I was amazed, this meant I didn't have to work. College was a fresh start, new people, new place.

To get to Taunton we had to get an early bus, I think we had to be on it at 6am. Things to start with seemed ok, I can remember getting off the bus after my first day.

I was so elated to be going to college, I was walking on air.

Things went by OK to start with, I managed. But the dyscalculia really kicked in when we were asked to design a bus timetable, and

later, I could not get my head around programming. Again, I had problems.

And once they surfaced, I became disillusioned. After this fresh start, here I was, same old story, the dunce.

A mutual friend had introduced me to a girl called Kerry, she came from my town, she got on my bus. I had never met her before; Kerry was one of those 'Raver's'. It was quite a scene in the 90's but the music didn't appeal to me. I was a hippy. But I liked Kerry, she had a very direct approach, no nonsense. Kerry was doing the same course as me, so I had a partner in crime. We hung out most of the time.

Part of the course was mathematics; you can't escape this even with basic computer science. I thought I would give it a go, despite not being able to get a GCSE. But of course, we would have a college tutor here, our maths teacher at school was hopeless. At least at the start of the course I was doing ok, somehow, I was managing homework which I think was algebra. I was pleased with myself.

Our maths teacher reminded me of David Attenborough.

Perhaps the maths was going 'OK' but really the rest of the course was not, and I was very much in two minds as to whether this was really for me. Just because I like computers, does not mean I want to work in IT. After a few initial weeks, slowly, Kerry and I stopped going to class.

We still went to college, on that 6am bus, in the dark and cold. And the long walk up from the harbour in the winter could be windy. But now, our new habitat was the smoking canteen.

Even early in the morning the canteen was busy. Often Kerry would utter 'sketchy' as we entered. We spent all day in there, waiting for the bus home, smoking, mucking about and playing cards. People came and went, there were several people we knew.

This was still very much in the period of me doing drugs, but my intake was nothing on Kerry's. Sometimes she would miss the bus in the morning, and I would worry that she may be dead.

We used to sneak out to the graveyard just adjacent to college and make joints. Have a smoke, then go play cards.

We tended to sit in largely the same place, strange how people had their places. It did vary a bit, but not much. One time a dinner lady accused me of making a large hole in the wall. It had been there from the beginning; I had noticed it. I protested; I had nothing to do with the hole. She said, 'I saw you do it', and I thought, well you didn't because I didn't make the hole. I did a lot of things wrong, but I never made a hole in the wall.

Quite often Kerry and I would drop acid in the smoking canteen, just to liven it up a bit. The thinking was, to most 'normies', they would just think we are nutty, and in general you don't get the police come to the SCAT smoking canteen. You can imagine, a busy college canteen, head full of LSD. It was quite the experience.

One time Kerry had a couple of 'microdots', which were particularly strong LSD. We wanted to take them; I asked Kerry if she could cut it in half, but you can't really cut microdots in half. And I later found out she gave me the whole thing. She had one too.

So, we waited for the effects of the microdot, yes it was strong. Then we decided it would be fun to go to our maths class, see what that

was like on LSD? I can remember queuing up in line to enter the classroom. Our classmates were used to Kerry and I being a bit odd. I was almost at panicking point. But told myself to chill.

We got in and sat down. Then the stress got real, our teacher came in. Kerry spent the whole lesson with her head in her hands, the teacher asked if she were, ok? I said yes, she's just tired.

I tried to look and behave as normal as possible, but the rest of the class knew. I tried to not let this get to me. I felt overpowered at one point, so much energy.

I didn't know what to do with myself, so I got up, went over to the bench, picked up a Bunsen burner, and returned to my desk.

One of our classmates said 'Oi, you don't need a Bunsen burner, this is a maths class'. I was confused. But I had made a mistake, so I got up, and put it back.

I wonder if David Attenborough knew we were tripping?

After about a year in the smoking canteen, Kerry had stopped going to college. I was fed up with it, it was time to realise I had failed this too. I stopped going, went home.

And had to try and think of what to do next.

Moving forward a bit, after SCAT. I moved in with old smokey, in a flat, in the centre of town, just for a laugh.

A chap called Simon had come over to mine and old smokey's flat where we were living. Simon was troubled. He had a heroin problem and was schizo-affective. Basically, a little bit schizophrenic. He

came up with all sorts of weird and wonderful things, and he kept bothering us, even if we tried to ignore him. He once scaled the outside of the flat and came in the window.

Simon was forever knocking about with one type of religious group or another, one week it would be the Buddhists, then he'd fall out with them and be with the Christians. Simon wasn't stupid, but he was crazy.

He once asked me if I would do crack? I said no, as that kind of thing is just too serious for me. I don't want the serious stuff; this was just about having a laugh.

Apparently, Simon had 'found' some dried mushrooms in an airing cupboard in the bedsit where he lived. He decided to bring them to us, so we could make tea. And we did. And I remember having rushes that felt like any minute now I was going to literally launch off the sofa and go through the roof. Old smokey went for a walk in the rain.

The whole evening Simon was perfectly sane. His mood was fine, he was sensible. He could talk ok. He sat peacefully reading a comic book, I've never seen him so sane.

The drugs period was most of my teens, I still indulged in a bit of pot now and then at 20, but nothing else. Heavy drinking took its place. It was legal, you could buy it in a shop, it was cheaper and easier. I don't think I could handle more drugs. I wasn't in the best place mentally anyway.

Oh, and I got a haircut. I got a job on a building site and could not face it with long hair. I expected to be teased just a bit too much. I had gone from being a hippie, to much more of a lad.

But I did my fair share of smoking and drinking. I have struggled with alcohol my whole adult life, and still now I struggle with it. I don't smoke now, but I did about four years ago. I'm 46 now.

It didn't help during my 20's that I discovered Hunter S. Thompson. He was so much fun it nearly killed me.

As well as music, books and films were a big part of my life back then. I can remember watching Johnny Depp in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. That was fun. But my favourite film has to be Withnail and I. I have had similar experiences.

Hazel

I fell in love once. During my late teens while living on the harbour. My mate Mo had a party in his huge house. I can remember one of the local idiots weeing in Mo's shoes in his hallway. I did do party's even though I was very shy. Mostly for the drugs.

There were quite a few people there, there would be, Mo was very social. Three floors of party this was. I hung around, smoked the odd joint. I never really liked parties. I was sat on the second floor, just across from me there was a girl sat against the wall.

I vaguely remember seeing her somewhere, she was friends with such and such. I think I said hello, just a quick exchange. But she was different, something about her not like the others. I was intrigued.

The night came to an end, as they often did, in the morning. I went home, very tired. But I'd got the bug. I started discreetly, although how discreetly I don't know, enquiring if she would be at such and such. All a bit obvious really. People probably knew I was interested. As it happened, I did bump into her a few more times and she was friendly.

But as she hung around with a quite different group to me, it was not often I did see her. She had just recently got back from going to France with some bloke who I considered to be much cooler than me, but for some reason he just wanted to be friends. She was on the rebound I thought.

I don't know how I did it, but I somehow got to talk to her and arrange for us to go and spend some time together. So, one afternoon, and it was sunny and lovely. She drove us up into the sticks to walk and talk. And we walked and found a field and lay down and talked. We could see planes flying overhead, probably destined for Bristol but perhaps anywhere, we speculated on where they could be going.

After a while, we got up to go to the local pub. A few of her friends were meeting there, and my rival. I felt uncomfortable. But I had to do it. On the walk back to the car I noticed there were beams of moonlight coming through the trees.

We got to the pub, and I tried to not say anything too stupid. Then we left. At this point I was panicking. What if she ends up with him? What if he changes his mind?

Right. So, this required a set of testicles. I had some, so best use them. We were driving along some country road and suddenly, I said 'stop the car', she said something like why? Is everything alright? I said stop the car, she said 'no'. I said please I need to talk to you. She begrudgingly stopped the car.

I stammered and said something like. It's, well, I, er. I really like you, but I like you more than just being friends, I mean I really like you; I want us to be more than just friends, what do you think? And to my utter amazement, she was ok with that idea. We arranged to see each other again. And I tried to not say or do anything too stupid until I could get back and calm down.

That was it now. She's ceased to be just some girl, now she was someone I was in love with. And that's a nice feeling, better than drugs. I walked on air thinking I finally had a girl I liked.

And we met up again, and eventually she said her mother, who she lived with, was going away somewhere and she had the place to herself. I took it cool to start with, I drove over to where she lived, stayed over, she cooked, we ate. She took some herbs from her mum's herb garden for salad.

And her cat had just had kittens, and they were adorable. To start with, we had a nice time together, just spending time, chilling, talking.

Then I ruined it totally by being a lunatic. I needed more of her. Not just now and then, one week and maybe not the next. I suggested that while her mum was away, I should move in with her! She was very reluctant, but eventually said yes. This was the beginning of the end.

It was a very bad move, far too much pressure far too soon. But I was obsessed with her. I don't think she had any idea at that time I was autistic. I didn't.

I spent time there with her, but she spent a lot of time away, doing this and that. She was going away because me being there was driving her nuts. There were little hints. There were signs of doom. I told myself I was just being paranoid.

She even drove me to Bridgwater for my stupid psychology exam. What a fool I am. Also, due to the paranoia I was trying to avoid, I had become grumpy and dull. The initial spark had gone. Little did I know there was not much time left.

One day we went to a mutual friends flat, and she said she wanted to talk to me. I had half an idea why but was still in denial. She said she didn't want to be my girlfriend anymore, I was boring. I was still

shocked, but more hurt. It hadn't even lasted long, but it was all over now.

I retreated to lick my wounds. My heart was broken. I was very hurt. I was still in love with her, but it was all my fault. Time passed, I think she took the remaining of my possessions and burnt them. The car that I thought was cool, got taken to the trash yard and crushed. We didn't see each other for a long time.

But after time, she became more friendly again, and we could still talk. I never fell out of love with her, but I got over it eventually. She was special. Her name was Hazel.

France with Christian –

About the time I had been dumped by Hazel I was hanging around with a bloke called Christian, Christian Boy Norman. I had known him for a while, I first met him in his little Honda Civic while smoking dope. And we got on from there. He seemed a nice laid-back kind of person.

Mostly at this time we were just drinking lots of beer, both of us alcoholics. Christian had been a surfer since he was young, and we used to drive over to Woolacombe bay to drink and camp. Christian would go in surfing, and then we would go to the various bars, The Red Barn to start with. Get drunk, go camping. We used to do this quite a lot and enjoyed it, it was a lovely drive over.

One day Christian asked if I wanted to have a go, you know, on a surfboard. I thought at the time, why not, it'd be fun to go into the sea, dunno if I can do it, but I'll have a go. What I didn't know then was I am likely dyspraxic, it goes hand in hand with dyslexia. My balance was never good.

Christian was one of those capable people, he had little patience for people who struggled. I just used to frustrate him. I can remember we used to go play snooker at the social club down the road from his house and he always found it frustrating that I could not remember the rules.

So, I went in to surf that day, just belly boarding really. But it was fun. I decided to keep it up. Eventually I bought his old board when he invested in a new one. And we went down to Devon many times,

I would say all in all I must have tried to surf for about two years, in all that time, I think I stood up on a wave about three times. I just kept losing balance. Even now, sometimes just standing I can feel unstable. I don't go up ladders.

At this point both Christian and I were feeling a bit low, I was wounded from rejection and Christian was not in the best mood, so we decided what we needed was an adventure.

Christian had been over to France before and fancied a trip again, I liked the idea of it. So, the Boy Norman did most of the planning. We were going to go over in my car, my trusty Chevette.

We were quite organised actually, before we went, we laid all our stuff out on the lawn at Christians, all our gear. And we both thought, if I am going, we better get the best travel insurance we can, so we did, five-star, tip top. And later it was to save us.

I did all the necessary checks, tire pressure, oil, and water. Then on one sunny morning, we loaded up the car, waved goodbye to his parents. And set off for the ferry. It was a long drive, but we had special music, Christian had compiled a mixtape, and so had I. At that time, we were into a lot of punk music.

We drove for what felt like an age in the sun, but I was to get used to this. There would be much more driving in France. I felt confident in Christian's ability to navigate, he can read maps, and even speak a bit of French.

We got in the line waiting to board the ferry, then eventually we were on board. When I parked the car, I did think, will I ever find it again? But I had Christian with me, he would find it.

I don't think it occurred to either of us that we had driving to do later, we were exhausted from the journey to the ferry, so it was time for beer. When we did arrive, and had to go get in the car, it was dusk, which quickly turned into night-time.

Not only were we tired, we were now drunk, and to add to it, this was the first time I had driven on the wrong side of the road. We disembarked the ferry, almost straight onto a roundabout, which took some navigating. And we set off into the night.

Christian wrestled with the map, and we drove and drove. Eventually, the tiredness set in, and we decided we needed to sleep. So, pulling off the main road, we found a truck stop. All the truckers were asleep, but we pulled up music blaring. And we slept in the car.

The next sunny morning, we set off for even more driving. Sometimes we spent most of the day driving, at one point later on, something dropped off the bottom of my car, I saw it in the rear-view mirror, but I just dismissed it.

We would stop at small towns for breakfast, which usually consisted of a large bottle of orange juice, a baguette, and some cream cheese.

Often, we would just sleep in the car, or if we wanted to pony up the cash, we sometimes paid for campsites.

One night we were pulled up off the road, listening to music, and drinking whisky. Minding our own business, we thought. But then, in my side mirror, I could see there was a police car. Very likely they had seen our plates; they knew we were English.

I tried to hide the whisky and waited. Not sure what the problem

was. The policeman knocked at the window, I opened it and he just said, 'your papers please'. I asked Christian where the passports were, and he said in the boot. In the boot, well, it was full of tinned goods, literally, it was a mess. So, locating the passports was not easy.

I eventually found them and handed them over. The policeman laughed, 'HA! Stuart, you look like a girl!'. I didn't know what he was talking about, but then realised I had not had a new passport since I was a teenager, my passport photo was of me with long hair.

He told us to pull over there, way out of the way of the road, to a more secluded spot. Which we did.

After the police had gone, we got some sleep, the next morning we got up, and trying to shave in the side mirror of a Vauxhall Chevette is no easy task. We took plenty of water, for washing and drinking, although we mostly drank booze.

We headed off on another sunny morning, more driving. Down the coast. This time we felt like splashing out. We found a nice very large campsite and paid for a pitch. Set up the tents, had a look around. We wanted showers. And proper toilets.

During the day we'd drive down to the beach and surf, but in the evening, we would walk into town for a proper drink. I seemed to have a knack for parking the car in direct sunlight, with the weather being as hot as it was, we walked around mostly without t shirts on. Getting back in the car we would find the seats, and steering wheel so hot you could hardly touch them.

On one occasion I left my acoustic guitar in the back window and when we got back to the car, the glue on the bridge had melted and

the bridge had popped right off. Must have made some noise that. I was later to repair it with a surfboard repair kit.

I took the guitar out to the town pubs one night. But really, I was too drunk to play it. Christian beckoned over a bunch of strangers to listen to me play, but he had not noticed how drunk I was, and I couldn't play for toffee. They went off a big grumpy, and Christian chastised me for embarrassing him.

One time back at the camp, we were playing The Prodigy particularly loud all afternoon. Then suddenly a very large bloke came up to us, and we thought, oh dear. But then he spoke, you like techno YA? We nodded. My friend is a DJ, you want to come with us? He was a very large, very friendly German, and he kindly said, but if you are too tired from surfing, ok. We politely declined, actually we were tired.

Some people from just over from us, on a mound. They came to see us one day, with a pamphlet with a picture of a bull on it. They asked if we wanted to come, me being me, I thought it would be like Pamplona, but Christian told me no. We declined this invitation too.

At the beach there was a bungee jumping thing, we eyed it up but after thinking about it, it would cost about a week's food money, so we passed on that.

Another night we went into town to the bars, and we were used to getting very drunk, but I had surpassed myself this night. To start with Christian didn't seem to notice, but when we set off to walk home, I was drifting from one side of the road to the other. Christian being Christian, he got fed up with this drunken behaviour, and just set off, leaving me on my own.

Once I had lost sight of him, I thought, well you're in trouble now. And how are you going to get back? I had the car keys, so he can't come looking in the morning. As I've mentioned my sense of direction is almost non-existent. And I was so drunk I could hardly walk. Don't ask me how, but I managed that long walk, I finally got back to camp.

Christian was doing things with one of the girls we had met, so I snuck by their tents. Got in my car. And proceeded to get very girly revenge on Christian. I ate all his crisps and chocolate. Well, the chocolate he would not be very bothered about, but he was addicted to crisps, when he eventually found out he was not happy. I slept in the car.

Owing to our evening use of the car stereo, we found out a couple of times in the morning that the battery was flat. Here at camp, we'd tried to drive into town, and it was a no go. So, I employed Christian to call a mechanic. Which he did, and we didn't have to wait long. The French mechanic came to camp in his large truck.

He was very skinny. He seemed put out. And he was constantly smoking cigarettes. He was charging the battery and then he offered me one of his cigarettes, I looked at the pack, they were Gauloises. I had been smoking the many Camel lights I bought on the ferry, which were horrid.

But mild. I accepted the cigarette, he lit it. When I inhaled it was like being punched in the throat, the shock of it. I coughed. I think I disposed of the cigarette.

Having said that, the Camel lights were so light, I had taken to pulling off the butt, to smoke them like a roll up. But even then, nothing compared to the French cigarette.

On one occasion, after a day in the sun, Christian and I went into the bar in the camp. The barman shouted at us, Ha! English lobsters!

One night we returned from town very specially drunk, but this time we were both very drunk, usually it was just me. When we got back, we were stood by an open-air cinema, we looked and they were playing that pig film, Babe.

We stood in drunken amazement and listened to a pig speak French, which we found highly amusing. Then we drunkenly became offended by how crap the film is and started whooping and hollering and flailing around. We upset the security guard. He had a look of horror on his face, even though he had a dog!

Christian is a skinny bloke. He didn't have much of an appetite. I have always had a very large appetite and living mostly from tin cans was not ideal.

One afternoon when we had been eating even less than usual, we set up the camping stove and cooked some instant mashed potatoes with tinned meatballs and gravy. I ate it all up, and to this day I have never eaten anything so good. It was delicious. Just as an experiment I cooked it again later once we had got home and found it inedible.

On one day, and remember I had to take my glasses off to go surfing, which meant I could not see well at all. Christian and I were out trying to get a wave, and I lost sight of him. I panicked a bit, and thought about the warning of rip tides, I thought, I better get in.

So, I paddled back to shore, unaware that I was actually in a swimming area. Once I got to the beach. I was greeted by an angry French lifeguard. YOU! YOU no surf in the swimming area. I tried to

explain I had no idea I was in a swimming area, he noted I was English. YOU! GO! YOU GO SURF THE ROAD! I mumbled something and walked off aware that Christian had said the lifeguards in France could fine you a lot.

One evening I decided to sleep in the car rather than the tent, as I thought it was more comfortable. This meant I had to leave my surfboard outside, but I thought that was ok. Christian slept in the tent.

I woke up, sunny morning, feeling particularly good. I rubbed sleepy eyes and looked around, excited for a new day. I got out of the car, then it hit me. Where is the surfboard? Christian having slept in the tent took his in with him. But mine was gone. Someone had stolen it. I was quite angry. How rude. It was stupid to leave it unchecked, but I am naive. So that was the end of my surfing.

We were in France for around a month, and towards the end of our stay we were mulling if we wanted to cross over to Spain, but a quick assessment of our financial situation put us at nearly broke, did we even have enough money for the petrol to get back? We decided we needed to head home, we offered some people from England we had met a lift back with us. They said yes. So, we set off.

We all drove and drove on a hot sunny day, eventually we got to Lyon. We got out of the car to use an ATM, then suddenly a large French woman approached us. Ladi Di, Ladi Di!!!!!! To start with we thought she was mad, but she proceeded to tell us, quite emotional that Lady Diana had been killed that day, in a tunnel in Paris. We took it in, but to be quite honest, with all the problems we had, it was small beer. We were not necessarily Royalists, although I don't think we had anything against Lady Diana.

One of the girls called me over and said, is there supposed to be a pile of oil under your car. I said no. And thought, oh dear. We tried to start the Chevette, but no deal. It was dead. At that point I realised that in the whole month we were out there in the sun, not once had I checked the oil and water, and now we were paying for it.

I again enlisted Christian to use the pay phone and call a mechanic. Who arrived in a big tow truck, he put the car on the truck, and we all sat on the back of the lorry, to be driven back to the garage.

We sat for a while in the office at the garage, waiting for the verdict. It didn't seem good. Then we were told, the car is dead, the engine block had cracked. We would have to abandon it. And the boot was still full of tin cans. So, we took the essentials. And again, Christian got on the phone to the insurance people.

He explained the situation and they arranged for us to stay in a local hotel, one so new it had not opened to the public yet. We thanked the French mechanics and got a taxi. That night we didn't see the others, it was just me and Christian in the hotel room. I have no idea what we ate.

Christian and I were watching French TV in the evening, there was some show on, in it, strangely dressed people were throwing midgets into a swimming pool. We went to bed.

More phone calls the next day, it had been arranged that we would be going home on the Eurostar, but first we needed to get to Paris. I let Christian figure this out. But we all got the train to Paris and on arrival, we noticed the Eurostar was about to leave, so we ran.

Of course, once again, we had forgotten that we would need passports. And where were they? They were where they would be,

right at the bottom of a very large ruck sack full of rubbish. It took ages to find them. But we got on the train.

In the end we arrived back at Waterloo Station in London late at night. We were grateful to have made it that far, but it occurred to us, at this time of night, there would be no coaches going. We couldn't face arranging another hotel, and we thought they might refuse this. So, Christian got on the phone again. We arranged to get a taxi back, from Waterloo station in London, to Alcombe, Somerset.

We explained the situation to the taxi driver and to our amazement he was ok. We piled into the taxi, already exhausted, for a very long drive home. I don't think any of us really slept in the taxi.

The journey seemed to take forever, but eventually we pulled into Fownes Road, Alcombe. It was a lovely sunny morning. We got to Christian's house, I looked at the meter, it was about £800.

We all got out and Christian and the others went into his house, I was so tired then that I decided to walk home, to the harbour. We said mumbled tired goodbyes, and I set off in the morning sunshine on the walk home.

Work was always a problem. I never had a job I liked. I needed to look for a way out of it. But being such a failure at school, it seemed unlikely that education would be a real option. However I was determined to prove I was not 'stupid', so I stupidly did an adult A level in Psychology at a local college.

I went into most of my GCSE's on some kind of drug, I think I was on popper's for biology. But this time I wanted to be serious. When I started the A level, I was quite poorly. No idea now what the problem was, I felt far too unwell to drive to Bridgwater to go to class, so the teacher sent me the assignment in the post for me to do at home. It was on the Stanford Prison Experiment, and I had never experienced psychology before. We didn't do that at school. I found it very interesting. I put some effort into the essay, sent it back, and eventually got my grade. For the first time in my life, I'd got an A.

I finished the A level with a B overall, things were a bit difficult for me at the time. I think I could have got an A if I had been more sensible. But anyway, it was only one A level. You need three if you want to go to university. But me? Go to university? You must be joking? No. I wanted to take it as far as possible.

Aberdeen – Summer School and First Year

I thought about doing more adult A levels, most of them were subjects I was not very interested in at the time. I did start an evening AS level in Philosophy, but due to it being so late and the journey back from Bridgwater, I ran out of steam with that.

Although I did enjoy what I had done. I was aware of how much the psychology A level had taken out of me; this should have been a warning. But I ignored it. I really didn't want to do more A levels, so what can I do? I looked around on the internet, eventually I found a Summer School for Access at the University of Aberdeen.

Well, that's a long way away I thought, but it's important. I had no idea about universities, no one had talked to me, the dunce, about it at school. I had no real idea where I wanted to go, so this seemed just as good as anything else. No other places were doing a summer school, they must be nice. I never really thought much about being in Scotland, why not go? Might be fun?

I thought, well it might be cold, might rain a lot. And it is right up at the top. How to get there? I didn't fancy getting on a train for that long. And a coach would take even longer. Looking at the comparable prices, flying was not exactly more expensive than the train. So, I could go out of Bristol airport.

I contacted them, trying to sound intelligent, but I just sounded like a twat. I was quite paranoid they may figure out I was the dunce. They got back to me, and yeah, if I wanted to go that was fine, just do the paperwork etc, and away to Aberdeen you go. Grand I thought.

There was an 'open' day. I thought I'd better go and get a feel for the place I've never been to Scotland, so I mentioned it to mum. Unfortunately, somehow, she mentioned it to dad, and he decided to come, or she asked him to come too.

So, the three of us went to Aberdeen, mum of course was fine, but dad was being particularly grumpy. We stayed in a hotel that once had Tony Blair as a guest. I had the idea at the time that I wanted to pursue psychology and philosophy, I had taken some philosophy book with me to read in the hotel. I must admit I did struggle to understand it. So, there I was, fully aware of how taxing the A level was for me, struggling to read a basic philosophy book and wanting to do an entire degree in philosophy. The penny didn't drop.

I took a walk around the main shopping street in Aberdeen, went into HMV, selected a bunch of CD's, went to pay for them and apparently my card was declined. I was pretty sure I had the money in the bank. I had to leave it, the chap at the till was quite moody.

The weather was a bit bleak; I didn't own a brolly. I walked about for a bit, took in the sight of all that granite. It was quite pretty but all a bit grey. We eventually got to the open day, and I could go see the university. Another wet, grey day. We were shown around, I loved the old King's College building, it was very pretty. Lots of the buildings around that part of the university were nice.

New Kings was quite a lovely building too. Just down from the original Kings College there were cloisters, I thought they were quite pretty. And I finally got to see the Old Brewery, this was the Aberdeen University philosophy department. Despite doing an A level in psychology, I had taken quite a liking to philosophy, because you could be original, think and argue. Great fun.

After the open day we went to an Indian restaurant in the city centre, I remember trying to air concerns to my dad, who was being very moody, and he dismissed everything I said.

At the end of the meal, he asked the waiter to get me a psychiatrist. I thought, he's not been this ill-mannered with me before. We walked back to the hotel in the evening light. Dad about ten paces in front of me and mum. Mum came into my room to see that I was ok, I was, I was used to dad not caring.

She went back to her room with dad, and he drank about two bottles of wine, then went to bed at about 6pm. Mum wanted to watch TV, but my dad shouted at her to turn it off. She ignored him.

I was in two minds about it all, it's a long way to go, and it's a bit cold and grey. But what other choice did I have? If I wanted to go to university, this was my only hope. And I really wanted to go.

Eventually the day came when I had to set off to go start Summer School. Mum must have given me a lift to Bristol airport. But I had to do this on my own. I took my wheely suitcase and boarded the plane. It's not a very long flight but we had to stop off in Manchester for some reason and deplane, to then get on the connecting flight to Aberdeen airport.

So, I had about two hours to kill at Manchester airport, and what to do? Well, the anxiety was kicking in and the usual solution to that is alcohol. So, I found a bar, and drank a lot of beer. I was reasonably drunk, but I managed to keep an eye on the time and got my connecting flight.

The next part of the flight didn't seem to take long, the nerves were really kicking in now. We got to Aberdeen airport, and I got off to see

that thankfully the airport is not massive, I could manage it. I went out to get the taxi, told the chap I was heading for Hillhead Halls of residence. And off we went.

He took me to the main hub at Hillhead. I got out, went into the reception room, and waited. Eventually someone came out, and I nervously asked where I was supposed to be, showed him my letter. He seemed a bit grumpy too.

He gave me general directions; I am not good with directions or navigating. But even though the complex is quite large, somehow, I found my block.

I don't know if it was luck, or if mum had called him up to let him know, but the man with the van arrived with all my stuff. I looked inside and found my room, first impression was, it was small. There was not much room. I'm not sure what I was expecting, I've never been to university before and had no clue at all. I had packed. A gun sized surfboard, with wetsuit. A technics separate's hi fi system. A desktop computer, with 21-inch monitor, lots of books, CD's, and all sorts. The room was so full of boxes I could not turn around unless I got on the bed and did it. Dread filled me. I had been crazy; I have taken far too much stuff with me. I needed a laptop, not a full-on PC desktop. What was I doing with a hi fi system? And where to put the surfboard?

At this point I realised something was not quite right. I thought about the morning and washing and changing clothes. Then realised I had no clothes. Drunk, I had gotten off the flight at the airport and got into a taxi and totally forgotten my suitcase. I had to phone the airport to check if they had it, then the next day, get a taxi out there, get the suitcase, then bring it back!

I can't remember who I saw first, I think it was the younger girl who was a bit mad, but very clever. She was friendly, we talked. Eventually other people started to arrive, and during the rest of the day/night, our hall was full. So was the hall to the right of us, and the adjacent hall had only two people in it. They turned out to be Sam and Kevin.

I had never been in a situation like this before, I had only ever lived with one person, and I knew him. I had very little contact with people, this was a total overdose. I don't know how I did it, but it would not have been easy for me, I made the effort, met people, and talked.

Things happen quite quickly in this environment, you get on. Well, mostly. I don't remember any animosity to start with. We were all young, all there for the Summer School, all wanting to go to university.

But of course, most of my friends there were Scottish. Which I was surprised by, I thought it would be other people trying to get in with non-Scottish qualifications, but they were there as an insurance policy, just in case they didn't do so well in their highers.

As it turns out, that was a good thing. I knew a couple of English people up in Aberdeen, but it was the Scottish that were the best. In fact, the people I met there, including one Welshman, were the best people I had ever met.

So we were there to study, to go to university. But we also wanted to have fun. And to break the ice and bond, we needed copious amounts of alcohol. Most of the time.

There was a little hub at Hillhead, as it was a bit of a distance from

the main part of Old Aberdeen. We had a launderette, where I managed to shrink a shirt and some trousers so much, I could not wear them anymore.

And a little games room, with a pool table. And some vending machines. This was my first encounter with the microwave cheeseburger. There is something about microwave cheeseburgers, you know they are evil, but so tempting, and so good.

Hillhead had a bar. YES!!! And we did go there and use it often. There was also a Lidl, just outside of the complex, a little walk away. Great for cheap booze.

And there is a student bar just by the Old Brewery on the road in Old Aberdeen. Scotland tends to have more bars rather than pubs. But that was fine, it just needed to serve booze, that was the requirement.

I think on that first night I had met Kevin. A rotund, not too tall chap with glasses and a big black overcoat. He had brought his 'Rocket Fuel' coffee to show people. He looked the type, so I early on enquired about illicit substances. Yeah, he was the type, but apparently, he couldn't get any Mescaline.

Looking at the outside of our block, it resembled some kind of Soviet failure. Very basic, bleak. The insides were alike. The kitchen was very small and very basic. We had a fridge! I remember once someone turned on the extractor fan in the hall and black stuff came out of it. They said the building had been condemned and was due to be destroyed, but we were living there.

We ate communally in the dining hall at the hub at Hillhead. You could get big portions, but for some reason it never filled you up for

long, an hour later you needed microwave cheeseburgers. The food was fine, but they said it was just the re heated stuff the real students didn't eat at lunch time.

Of course, you had to que up to get it, we were all there, before the hall was even open, as we were hungry. You could not cook with what was in the kitchen, so the food they provided was all.

I remember buying some tinned stuff from Lidl and eating it cold out of the tin, that was not so great.

Not a day passed without lots of alcohol consumption. During the day we had lectures to attend. You could choose from a range of subjects, I think I did English, Philosophy, General Studies, and Economics. Not that I was interested in Economics, I just had to pick just so many subjects, and the other subjects involved more maths.

I enjoyed the lectures, loved philosophy, that was great fun. And I loved English too, our tutors for those subjects were great. One fantastic lady who was teaching us English had worked her way up to PhD from being the Universities cleaner.

I remember once on our English course the tutors had asked us to read Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Bronte. We had a week to read it and write an essay about the use of Gothic imagery.

I got the book, and looking at it, even with all the effort in the world it would take me at least a week just to read it, let alone then analyse and write an essay. I talked to our English tutor, and she told me some tips. I had to do it, somehow.

My solution was to get the bus out to the medical teaching facility where the student café was open 24/7. They had vending machines,

tables, computers. I could not really work in the day because it was so hectic in halls and we had lectures, so I went out of an evening to the medical facility and sat in the café reading and taking notes.

Once you were out there, the busses stopped at about 7. I had no idea how to get back to halls without the bus, so I had committed myself to an all nighter.

I could only get back in the morning, that's when the busses started again. One time the door to a cupboard in the café was left open, so I peeked in. Inside there were lots of specimen jars, with various body parts in them, they fascinated me. Another time, and the first and only time I saw someone else there, some white coat medical student walked in to use the vending machine for coffee.

He asked me what I was doing there, he looked quizzical as I was reading literature. I explained, and he was quite nice. He said he had to give injections to rats every three hours so needed to stay up.

My solution to the reading speed problem was to log on to the computers at the café and do some research online. Looking specifically for Gothic imagery I got chapter synopses. I wrote my essay, it was not good, and didn't get a good mark. And to this day I have never read Jane Eyre.

I can remember going into my English lecture the next day after an all nighter and being sat there with my eyes closing every ten seconds, trying very hard to stay awake. And it would be the head of department that was taking the lecture. He was the boss of the Summer School and if he didn't like you, he got rid of you. He must have thought I found it boring, I really didn't, I'd been up all-night working.

I can remember one night a friend of mine came to my room, Sue. She was young, I don't know her age, but she had come from school to Uni. I think she may have been interested in me as she spent the best part of the night in my room with me discussing our philosophy essay with Brian Eno's Music for Airports on loop the whole time.

She was very pretty, and very lovely. But she was too young. I was not about to exploit some sixteen-year-old, and the age and experience gap would have been too much for a relationship. So, we just talked. But Sue was lovely.

One night, powerfully fuelled by booze, a group of them decided to get the paddling pool out, and inflate it, and fill it with water, on the third floor kitchen. They all got in it; I was reluctant. But got in in the end. I can be a bit miserable.

The problem here was that we had people patrolling the site on a regular basis, the officials. If they came up to us, with all that noise, and saw a paddling pool, we'd all be going home quite quickly. No degree for you.

After some time in the pool, we got notice the official was on their way and had to very quickly get rid of all the, now almost black, water. Deflate it and hide it. All while even more drunk than when we started. But we did it.

There was some bloke in the adjacent flats who had taken a disliking to me, probably because I was English, I had not upset him deliberately. I went into our kitchen at one point to get beer and the window broke. I had no idea what had happened but later found out he had an air pistol and had shot at me. He was thrown off the course.

The young chap in the room next to mine also had a problem with me. He never said anything directly, but we were all in my room one night watching a DVD on my computer and I could see out of the corner of my eye he was picking his nose and dropping it on my bed! He was not a big bloke, so this was bold. I just ignored it, he quit Summer School anyway.

The two blokes in the adjoining block to ours, Sam, and Kev. Well, they were a bit different. These were 'cool' people. I had met some before, I was up for a good time, but I didn't think I was very cool.

They came over to us mostly, for a drink and laugh. Sam was the surfer, he once told me there were waves on the beach only for me to get down there and find it flat. Just taking the mick then.

Kev was very funny, he made music on his computer, he used an Apple Mac. And he DJ 'ed in the city. One night we were over in the other blocks kitchen, a few of us. When I arrived Kev said he was brewing some tea, and would I like some? I clicked this was not normal tea by the saucepan.

He's got mushrooms. I thought, I've had plenty of booze, lets try something else. I said yes.

I was sat talking to Kev and suddenly, he said let's go for a walk! I asked why and he said my pupils were huge and if we get caught, we'd all be going home and no university. So, I thought, well it's not much fun in this kitchen anyway, let's go walk. We headed off out of the halls complex to where I had no idea, but Kev knew. Eventually we got into some vegetation, there was just a small path and lots of greenery, including trees.

I noticed that by the side of the path there was quite a long steep

drop. We came out of the vegetation and eventually arrived at the beach. There were a few of us. We spent the night sat on the beach, making joints. Talking and laughing. I remember it was not very warm.

Early morning came, most of the effects of the mushrooms had worn off. Our Welsh friend didn't partake in the shrooms, he was sober. On our way back we stopped off at a petrol station to get food. I didn't go in, but soon after a group had gone in there, they came running out again. Apparently one of the group had tried to steal something from the shop and the shopkeeper chased them out. They ran off into the night.

At this point it was dark, night-time/early morning. And we had to go back the way we came, along the path in the vegetation. Being dark I could not see where to put my feet and was quite scared that I would end up at the bottom of the steep drop! But we made it back, and we were much calmer now.

I remember one night; Sam had come to see us as he had tickets to a show on at the theatre in town. His mate couldn't go, and he wanted someone to go with him. So, I said yes, I liked Sam, he was always cheerful. We went to see 'Thunderbirds'. And it made quite a change for me. Of course, wherever we went we walked.

On the way back to halls it was dark, and with the way we went back we needed to go through Seaton Park, we were always told don't go in there after dark. But we went. I could not see a thing and was a bit nervous about it. But Sam was in good spirits and eventually we made it to the end and up the embankment back home.

In our hall we had an Arabic chap called Rashid. He didn't really cause any trouble and didn't drink of course but sometimes had

difficult opinions. I can remember him telling a friend of mine that she probably had a miscarriage because she dressed suggestively, I thought that was a bit rough.

He didn't like homosexuals either, I don't think anyone there was gay, but I tried to suggest that people are different, and he should be open minded.

Rashid needed to wash before prayer. I had no issue with this, but I tried to ask him to choose a sink, whichever one, and tell us. I didn't want to brush my teeth and shave in a sink that had his feet in it. He didn't agree with me.

We also had a much more mature student with us, Murdoch. Who used to be a farmer but fancied his hand at university. Murdoch was slightly mad. And he was a big bloke. He cheated on a poetry test we had to sit in class, so we all had to re-sit it. I don't know how he cheated, but he was told off for it.

Eventually Rashid decided we were too much for him, so he moved, downstairs, into the block Murdoch was in. Murdoch being Murdoch, he just kept threatening Rashid with physical violence.

I met another mature student there, Simon. He had been in the music industry and had some money but wanted to study psychology.

He told me when he first arrived at Hillhead it brought him to tears as it looked so crap, so he went off and got a private flat. I fell out with him once, we were in a night club, I was drunk and looking for an argument. I had just been learning about nuclear weapons in philosophy class and I had told him we should ban them and get rid of them.

Simon very strongly didn't agree, his argument was that you can't un-invent a technology. We can't 'get rid of them', someone would always have them, to prevent annihilation, we need more not less. I argued as I could be opinionated, and we nearly badly fell out. Luckily Simon was an easy-going guy, I think back now, and I agree with Simon, I was just being stupid.

Belmont St was where we often ended up in town looking for a drink and night out. There were several bars and nightclubs there back then. One amazing bar converted from an old church; it was quite big inside.

As you turned into the street there was a bar called Drummonds. We went there very often. It had lots of live music, but it also had a reputation. This is where the drug dealers go. I was in there once with Kev. We had just been to the bar to get drinks and were around the dance floor when Kev announced, oh, that's my mum.

Recently Kev had told me how he was brought up feral in the woods. I struggled to believe this, but thought he's usually honest, perhaps. Kev said hi mum this is Stuart my friend, he's English. I kid you not, but Kev's mum literally growled at me. And said nothing else. At that point I believed him, the woods you say, yes, of course.

I saw Kev's flat once, I remember litter all over the floor, no furniture, and a set of decks. I was sat with him in a psychology lecture once while he was on ecstasy, pilling away trying not to get too agitated. Apparently, a stripper he knew had woken him up with it at his flat and he felt it rude to turn down.

Aberdeen was the first time I properly took ecstasy. It was a raver drug; I was a hippie. But my mate Tam, who looked a bit like his mechanism was shot, took it every weekend. Tam was brilliant, a

very lovely bloke. We got on well.

He had been born in Preston, but had moved to Aberdeen when very young, he had a bit of a mixture of Scottish and English in his accent but had adopted Scotland as his home. We were on a bus once, in the centre of town, and Tam broke out into the Scottish National Anthem, there and then. Loud and clear. I was not embarrassed by this, frankly I loved him. But no one joined in, and me being English I thought I better stay quiet.

Tam often had 'too many' ecstasy tablets, or 'pill's'. And wanted someone to take them with, so because I liked him so much, I partook. We went to a nightclub in town one night, I kept going up to the bar and asking for a glass of water, and Tam told me to stop doing that or they will get suspicious.

So, I stopped and went over to a very large speaker, which I stood right in front of and danced away. We got back to the halls later and I was talking to another friend in our kitchen when I noticed I was deaf in one ear and the other ear was ringing.

My friend in the kitchen got into a conversation with me and he decided to tell me that I was a psychopath. I was a little taken aback by this, I tried to argue my case, in my opinion I was not a psychopath, I liked animals. But he was having none of it.

Tam and I went to flat sit for his sister once, she was away, and we stayed the night with her cat in her flat in the city centre. Down the docks area of Aberdeen there was a bar that opened all day, I had never been there. I never went down the docks.

In the morning, Tam and I were awake and, in the lounge, and suddenly, we could hear loud singing in the street outside, 'we're off

to the pub to get pissed'. It was Kev, on his way down to the docks, it was about 9am.

I remember going to see Sam once, in his and Kev's halls. I wanted to borrow a CD, Radiohead. I walked into Sam's room and on his table was a very neatly stacked large pile of dead flies.

During Summer School I had met a very likeable bloke called Craig, Craig Stewart. He was a cheerful ginger Aberdonian, and he was very nice, very down to earth, but very bright. And he had a great sense of humour.

He wanted to study English so he could go on to be a journalist, he liked writing reports on the local football teams games. I got quite close to him as a friend, and we kept together even after Summer School. He was usually the nicest bloke, but after a few drinks you did tend to get, 'English wanker', come out of him.

The beach at Aberdeen was a fair walk from Hillhead, but we did it quite often. It was lovely to see the sea. Often quite windy and a bit chilly, I should have been used to that from Felixstowe, but I had gone a bit soft. We walked down there quite often.

Along the beach there was a nightclub that people often went to, we used to get a bus from town to it. I only went a couple of times, but I remember the amusing, ladies in cages dancing. One night I was so drunk I fell asleep with my head in an ashtray.

That night I left my jacket behind, which had needed to be checked in on arrival and had to go all the way back the next day, I tried to reason with them that it was my jacket, but to start with they wouldn't have it, unless I had the ticket, I was not getting my jacket back. I didn't have the ticket, but I think they felt sorry for me.

I eventually got it back, put it on, and walked home. On the way home, I think the exhaustion and hangover just got the better of me and I had an autistic moment and burst into tears. I just couldn't stand the idea of losing my jacket, I rather liked it.

One evening, Tam and I were pilling and went over to a friend of his, to their flat, to hang out for the evening. I had been invited. We sat there in the lounge on the floor in a group chatting and laughing. I remember being pretty high, sometimes the pills Tam gave you were rubbish and did very little, but this one worked. I was getting on well with a nice English girl who was studying at Bristol university.

One of Tams girlfriends had said to me that she liked me. I was talking to her fine up until that point, then it all went pear shaped. I can't handle intimacy, being friendly is fine, but any more than that and I can't deal with it.

Tam's friend was trying to get us together and I felt like I had entered a nightmare. Still high on drugs I had to sit there with this on my mind now. I'm not like the other boys, I mostly don't get intimate with people, I'm not keen on it.

Eventually we all needed to go to bed, and I actually slept in the same room as her, and just ignored her. I'm sure she thought I was quite odd, but none of us knew at that point I was autistic, I don't do intimacy. I have in the past, on occasion. But very rarely. I just could not handle it.

In the morning, Tam had to go somewhere, and I was left to find my way home on my own. I am not good with directions, and I had never been to this part of town before. But somehow, I found my way home, this particular story is from when I had my flat, just after Summer School.

I was very relieved to get home, but on turning into the road I noticed a large white van. I had not slept all night, was still high on drugs, and had walked about four miles and in the van was my landlord. I pretended I didn't see him and shuffled off into my flat.

We had sat our exams and handed in our essays. We had to wait for our results. And I remember thinking, but how do we find out if we passed?

Tam knew. It was posted on the board somewhere. I was walking past the bar towards Seaton and Tam came running up to me, he slapped me on the back and said, 'we're in'. I said in what? He said we passed, we're in.

It's on the notice board. I was very relieved to not have to go all the way back to England. But I had to see it for myself, so I asked Tam to take me to it, to show me. Sure enough, we'd done it. We were going to start university proper, but there was one problem. Where do I live?

In it all, I had not stopped to think about what do I do if I am successful and get in and need to stay here. To start with I made hasty arrangements to move to a different hall, and this was no small task. I had to take all my stuff by hand, walking it to the new hall, and I had a lot of stuff.

I can remember being in the new hall, I entered and could hear someone was in there, so I said hello, and got, oh the effing English! I thought well they are not too friendly so best avoid them.

Just prior to moving into the new hall, I had received a surprise phone call. I'm not sure if I even knew we had a phone. Someone answered it and said it was for me. I was quite curious, I answered,

and it was a woman's voice on the other end, and she said she liked me, and would I like to get a flat with her?

I was so desperate for someone from Summer School to live with, and she seemed friendly, so I pretty much straight away said yes. But who was she?

She said her name was Yasmin, and she was with the girls in the block just above Sam and Kev. I didn't know them very well, so I went over and knocked. I spoke to the mature student who was there, and she was lovely, I asked about Yasmin, and she said we rarely see her, she's always in her room. Somehow, I got to see her and talk to her.

I had not really noticed her before. She was very pretty, and I had no idea why she was interested in me? But she said, come over to my friends' halls and we'll cook for you, come, and have a chat. I thought, this girl is very friendly for someone I hardly know but sure of course I will.

So, we went over to her friends' halls, Sarah, and she somehow had cooked a cottage pie. Her halls were nice. We ate and chatted and got on fine. Then I had to walk back through Seaton to my halls and on the way, Yasmin got my attention, she was a bit nervous, a bit of a stutter.

And I thought, what's all this? She said, 'it's, well, it's about Sarah....' I said yes? She said, 'well, she. She's, my wife! At that point I thought, oh, so she's not interested in me then. It didn't bother me at all that she was gay, I was surprised, I had not anticipated it. But I said something like, 'oh, oh well that's fine, thanks for telling me'.

As it turned out the fact that Yasmin was gay was a secret, she had not told the other girls or anyone on Summer School. But for some reason she trusted me. Some bloke, and an English bloke too. We said it's all fine no worries do you still want to get a flat, she said yes, and she went looking and took me around a few but they all had problems, too far away, too cold.

Then she said I've found something that's just perfect. So, I went with her, and it was just down the road from Kings, just a short walk to Uni. It was an extension on an existing student house, built to house two people. It was modern, and warm, and close. I said if you are happy with it, I am let's get it. So, we went to town to see the solicitor people and they asked if we were a couple, we said no just friends. But we got the paperwork sorted, and eventually we moved in.

I had the big room, I think Yasmin knew she would be spending a lot of time with Sarah, so she took the small room. I had a lot of space and the heating worked fine; I kept it tropical. Aberdeen winters have some dark, short, cold days.

Yasmin would pop in now and then, but she did spend most of her time at Sarahs. I pretty much had the place to myself. There was one problem, the nearest supermarket was a long walk away down, and then back up a hill. Otherwise, I couldn't have been happier.

I liked Yasmin, she was usually cheerful if a bit nutty. I can remember her launching into an attack on our philosophy lecturer mid lecture, he'd said something she found offensive I have no idea what, but she was gesturing and shouting, and he looked quite small suddenly. It was then that I thought, I like this nutcase.

Sarah was more even in temperament, but they had a real

relationship. Sarah was in her second year I think, and Yasmin and I were just starting our first. In Scotland the degree lasts four years.

I can remember one winter, dark and cold. I put my coat on to go shopping, I think I had stupidly bought about seven bags of shopping, never thinking, how am I supposed to carry this back? Up the hill I went on my way home, started out fine. But soon became quite a challenge. I am certain there would have been booze in there so that would have been heavy.

I got most of the way back, then had to stop, put the bags down, rest, pick them up, do a few more paces, stop, rest. Go again. All the way home. I kept telling myself, just think of the SAS, those boys would do this easy. But I was not in the SAS, I was not even Scottish!

Of course, I made it back in the end, I opened my front door to a wave of tropical heat, I liked to keep the heating on. What a relief!

I met a bloke, Tom. I really met him in my first year, Craig had introduced me. First impressions of Tom were that he was rather stand offish. Not too warm. I learnt that he had been in Aberdeen most of his life, but he was in fact English, though he didn't think so.

His parents were English, they just moved to Scotland. His dad had died when he was young. Tom was awkward to start with, but over time we became quite close. He was also doing philosophy; Tom was brighter than I was, and I think my stupidity bothered him. Yes, he was English.

Well, he put up with me while I was there, we used to hang out, listen to music, smoke pot, drink booze. He had a flat with his born-again Christian brother just literally up the road from me. His brother

irritated him a lot, in fact lots of things irritated Tom, he was quite opinionated. Never very vocal, but he had some strange opinions.

One day he came over to my flat and announced that he got hold of some skunk weed. I told him that it is much stronger than what we are used to so be a bit careful. He dismissed my advice, who would want advice from this idiot? Anyway, he smoked a whole joint of it as quickly as normal, then I saw him slip down my outside wall and collapse on the floor.

I woke him up, and asked if he was, ok? He mumbled. Eventually spoke. Apparently, he'd been at work all day and had neglected to eat anything. So, me being a friend, I went and got him a chicken tikka kebab from our local Indian restaurant just up the road from me, and a can of coke, and gave it to him. He eventually recovered, didn't seem very grateful. Not sure what we did after that, but I did warn him.

I went over to his flat once and his brother's door had a big hole in it, I asked what had happened and Tom said his brother had annoyed him, so he hit his door. Amazing the damage really, Tom was very skinny.

We went to the beach one cold autumn day and Tom suggested going for swim, despite not having swimming costumes, in the cold sea. Not to be outdone by this pretentious skinny hippie I thought ok, you want a challenge, let's do this. We got into the water, and I'm pleased to say he gave up first and got out. Yes, it was cold.

I spent quite a bit of time with Tam and Craig, and Tom in my first year. Lots of going to the pub, etc. It was all good, but I was struggling with my studies. I could never really get myself to sit down and read, handy if you're doing a degree in philosophy. I think of this

now as a possible attention disorder, but back then I only know I was dyslexic, I had not idea of anything else.

If I wrote an essay, it was an all-night, the night before it was due job. I never wrote a good essay, but to my amazement occasionally I got a first class. Not often. I had to look at the next three years of this, three years of reading philosophy. Is this realistic? What I know now,

I would never have put myself in this position. But back then I thought I was just like everyone else; I was no different. After the first-year finals, I decided that I was struggling too much with philosophy, some of it I 'got', but some I really didn't, and I didn't want to commit to another three years.

I had to take stock. I had become quite paranoid about being English in Scotland, something that never occurred to me before. But now and then I would get a funny reaction. The lady at the checkout would be cheerily chatting to the Scottish customer, then I would say a very English, 'hullo'. And the face would change, and the mood would change.

My friend in the record shop was not working there anymore, I suspect he was fired for turning down what was about £100 worth of CD's with the excuse that my card didn't work, when it did. He worked in another shop that I later went into, I can't remember what I went in there for. But at the checkout they were selling brollies, not very Scottish. I thought I would just wind him up and buy one from him, just to be English.

That backfired when I left the umbrella in a lecture hall in a particularly labyrinthine building once and had to go back to get it. I hardly ever used it, it just screamed 'English'.

At this point Yasmin had moved out to finally live full time with Sarah, she had done her bit, and found someone else to move in, some young Chinese chap. Who never talked to me and spend all day in his room. I didn't take to him. I didn't want to live with him, he was not my Yasmin. Things had changed, I was not very happy now.

It was a hard decision, but finally I got the paperwork, filled it in, and submitted it. And after my first year, which I had finished successfully, I was away, as they say, back to England.

Mum's new house.

Just before I first went off to Scotland, mum had finally told dad she had had enough of him. And wanted to separate. It took her long enough. Previously she had put up with his bad behaviour as she thought I needed a father; he was never a father.

Now all his having affairs, numerous, and insulting mum had caught up with him. He had recently retired and was being very financially demanding without bringing in anywhere near as much money.

He demanded his crate of wine each week. Spent most of his time in his room, drinking it. Instead of getting a job, to bring a bit more money in. He decided to go to college. The separation happened while I was away. And in all the time I had been away mum had got a new house on her own. I was about to see it for the first time.

It was a simple modern red brick build, we were no longer down by the sea but up in the sticks and a good walk from town, for me, I still didn't have a car. I liked the house, it was the smallest I'd lived in with mum, but it was a nice house. My main complaint would be that my room was a bit too small. Well, there wasn't quite enough room in general, but we both liked it.

Later our neighbour who insisted on blasting out music all day and night would be a problem, no matter how nicely we asked her to turn it down, she might for half an hour, then back up, at 1 am. And the stairs, up to the bedrooms, and out of the front door to the street up a hill. Later this would be too much. But I was home for now.

I still saw myself as a 'student', and still wanted a degree. So, I started thinking how I could approach getting into somewhere closer to home? I looked, but I didn't really have much of a preference. There was nowhere that really stood out. Nowhere I really wanted to go, I had very little idea of any of the places. I contacted a few places, but they were not very interested.

For some time, I had held the London degree in high regard. I liked the structure of it, how well defined it all was. I knew a London degree was prestigious. It was a bit daunting; I mean there was no way someone like me was going to get into UCL or Kings, come on. I had one A level at grade B. Those places are straight A only.

I did know someone at Summer School who went to London, but he went to one of the more regular colleges. So, I thought, London has many colleges, let's look.

London -

I looked at a few, but the one that had the lowest entrance criteria, was a place called Goldsmiths College. It was in London, Southeast. New Cross. I didn't know much about it, but vaguely remembered it had a bit of a name with art. I thought of Damien Hirst. It's a bit special, but then I am not going to study art.

I had given up on the idea of being a philosopher, had to accept I was not smart enough for that. So had decided to pursue psychology. Goldsmiths had a psychology department, and the degree looked good.

And I thought, well I like music, and literature. I don't know much about art, but that's ok. So, I thought about it, and I thought, the chances of London letting me in with one A level are slim. You never know, why not apply through clearing, they can only say no.

I summoned the guts, got the UCAS form, and sent off the application. I never thought in a million years that they would say yes and let me in. So, I thought to myself, this is it now. You are back, you have failed, now you'll have to get the same kind of job you were trying to get away from and go back to the start.

Some time passed, one afternoon the phone rang. Mum answered it. She said it was for me, so I took it and listened. Some nice person on the other end said they were from Goldsmiths and my application was successful and I had a place. I was very excited, and I just couldn't believe it.

I did think at the time, what have I done? But all being well, I was on my way to London. I thought to myself, well you lived in Aberdeen, that is a city, you just have to live in a slightly bigger one. Take the opportunity, it's the best you've had.

Eventually the day came, I travelled up to London by train. A much less arduous journey than all the way up to Aberdeen. But a bit more complicated. I think I ended up at Waterloo station and then got on the underground out to New Cross.

I was so worried about being able to navigate the underground, I was not fully aware of my learning disabilities then, but I knew how I struggled. I got there, to New Cross Gate station, and just down the high street, seemingly out of nowhere was Goldsmiths. A pretty building, but very different from the much larger granite grey of Aberdeen.

One way or another I got my stuff together and got sorted, I had to find my new halls. They were out in Brockley, just down the road from the college. I took a walk, down the wrong street. Stopped in a shop, asked about the halls.

The shopkeeper just shook his head. I left and carried on, eventually I got on the right street, long, looked quite well to do. It was all a bit posh really, I had a feeling even then of what am I doing here? That never left me, I always felt like an intruder.

I found my halls, went to reception. The girl on the desk was moody. I asked if I could smoke and she kind of said no but people do. So, I took that as a yes. I found my room, and it was small. But this time it had a toilet and shower in it.

I can't remember when I first saw my flatmates. I was nervous, the

looming prestige of London University was weighing heavily on me. What if they figure out, I'm daft? What if they figure out, I'm common?

The kitchen here was a little better equipped than at Hillhead, but small. Over time, I met the people I would be living with for that year. One mature student lady who was a bit stand offish and kept herself to herself. And. A bunch of Yanks. All the other students on my floor were American, apart from one bloke upstairs, who I didn't see very often.

Directly opposite me in a room much bigger than mine which I was a bit envious of, was Dan. And he looked like he had come from an American art school. Yes, he was an artist, and he was from Chicago.

Right at the end of the hall, by the entrance was another American, who had some disability. He seemed fine at first, but later he took a strong disliking to me. I hardly ever saw him, nor spoke to him.

Just down from him, was another mature student, a woman fine artist, photography. From New York. She thought London was dirty, and grimy. Of Indian heritage.

Just above me, and to the left a bit, upstairs, was a bloke called Eric. He was nutty. Another American.

Literally just above me was some bloke, who was very stand offish. He liked to have very noisy violent sex with his girlfriend. I never spoke to him.

There were more people in the halls, but I rarely saw them.

I had learned the lesson from Aberdeen and this time took minimal stuff with me. Partly as I just had a suitcase to take on the train. I took, a laptop, clothes, and books. So, it didn't take long to settle in. I don't remember my first encounter with my flatmates, but we eventually saw each other and talked and hung out.

I probably spend most of my social time with Dan and Eric. I quite liked Dan, but he was a bit of a punk. A likeable punk. He introduced me to some American art school music, which I got into at the time. Modest Mouse, Bright Eyes.

I thought I had a ticket to Goldsmiths with my love of music, general creativity, literature. But nothing could prepare me for what I experienced, I was so out of my depth, I knew next to nothing. The people there, well the impression I got, was.

They had almost encyclopaedic artistic knowledge, I could not have a sensible intelligent conversation with them, I knew next to nothing. I felt like I was very much now in the wrong place, and just tried to knuckle down and get my London degree, that's what I came for, but can I do it?

I can remember one time, Eric was drunk. I had about seven textbooks in my room. Which I now know was totally unnecessary, but at the time I thought I was being studious. I was stood by the door to my room and Eric said, 'do any of those books tell you how stupid you are'?

I didn't want to fall out with him as we lived together, and I had my own doubts about my abilities, and perhaps thought, maybe he's right? I just went into my room and shut the door.

The irony was that I didn't get the impression that Eric was any

brighter than I was, but everyone always assumes I'm stupid. Without wanting to be nasty, Eric was pretty pretentious, and a little crazy, and the other art students derided his attempt at art. He was later kicked off his course as he was, well, crap.

But Eric was truly a force of nature, he blew up about this. He wanted his Goldsmiths degree, and all the way from the USA, he attacked them so much, they let him come back! Why not let some dumb yank come back, the fee's for non UK students were huge, they could make a years worth of money out of Eric, then fail him again, smart move.

I used to buy Joss Sticks in a shop down there in Brockley as I smoked and it stank out the small room, Dan asked me to slip a couple under his door as he liked them too, I did.

I remember once I challenged Dan to a whiskey drinking contest, I had a bottle of Jack Daniels, I don't drink that now, don't like it. I like Scotch. But he and I sat in the small kitchen, with our bottle and glasses. And we drank it, I had more than him, I drink faster and larger shots.

But we had roughly half of it each I would say. Dan excused himself and went off to his room. Later I found out he was stinking drunk and in bed, while at this time Eric asked if I'd seen some movie, and would I like to watch it? I said sure, glad of the company, so Eric and I sat in my room and watched Seven Samurai, I was not very drunk.

The lecture theatre for us psychology students was just adjacent to the department. Which was super convenient. Sometimes at Aberdeen you had to get about a bit for the lectures, but ironically here we were in London, and it was just there, right where we needed it.

The lectures were good, I loved lectures, I always did at Aberdeen. Like listening to some interesting documentary all for you, live. To start with I didn't really talk to or mix with the other students, they didn't seem to take to me.

Perhaps they could smell my plebian stupidity? One chap, Alex, came up to me at one point and started talking to me, he seemed very friendly, so I talked back, we chatted a bit and ended up sitting next to each other in class and became quite friendly. I was grateful, or I would have been on my own.

I started socialising with Alex, we had coffee in the café in the college, we had a drink in the student union. One time I tried to get into the student union and the 'bouncer' said, are you sure you're a student here? I thought, oh wonderful, as if I don't feel bad enough. I showed him my ID badge and went in.

Alex was a nice warm and friendly bloke, and he was a Godsend to me, he was pretty much the only person I spent real time with, and over the course of the year we did much together. The trouble with Alex was, he was normal. I was a freak, he didn't have the background I did, he was not a heavy drinking ex druggie. And it was the drinking that broke us up.

I had been an alcoholic since I was at least 20 and it was my way of coping and boy did I need it in London, at London University and at Goldsmiths. My attitude was, we are first years, in London, time to party! But that was not how Alex was. He kept going on at me, moaning about how much I drank.

And if there is one thing you don't do to an alcoholic, it's chastise their drinking.

Alex was bright, he was brighter than me, but I didn't want to accept that, my ego was rather large at this point. But for someone so bright, how could he make the mistake of boring me about my booze?

Sometimes Alex and I would get the train into the city centre or somewhere outside of South London, we'd go to nice pubs, he introduced me to his, quite amazing girlfriend. And I mean this by way of her being a medical student at UCL. No mean feat, she was super bright. Sharp as a tack. I liked her, Alex, his girlfriend, and their mates were not snobs. I was so lucky to know them, and in the end, I threw it all away, with my own bad attitude.

When we all went for a drink, it was always me that got drunk, the other would have a couple of pints and be fine and go home, but I was the drunkard. Sometimes we went to the medical student's union for a drink, and on one occasion I remember being so drunk I kicked the door open.

To the shock of the person sat there granting admission, they made excuses for me, and we went in. His girlfriend did the medical questionnaire for alcoholics on me, and I dismissed it as most alcoholics would, I thought the questions were stupid, and I was in denial.

Later that evening just outside of the union there was a lift, on the outside of the building, in my inebriated state I thought it would be fun to ride the lift, so I got in, Alex tried to grab me, but I was too quick. I got to some floor, where I don't know and there was someone there, they looked at me and said, 'who are you?', I laughed and then took the lift back down to the group, who dismissed it as just more of my drunken behaviour.

On the floor above me there was a pretty Irish girl, she was friendly. Nice. I had met her a couple of times. On one occasion I saw her she asked me if I wanted to go on a protest march tomorrow, protesting against the war in Iraq. I thought to myself, I'm not a huge fan of this war, likely innocent service men and women will die just because of stupid politics. But I've never really been political, I'm not a protestor.

The reason I said yes was because she was pretty, and I stupidly thought she liked me. The next day I turned up at the café in the college and she was sat with some important bloke and they looked quite the part. That's that then, I thought. She's not bothered about me, and what do I do now? It would look funny if I suddenly got up and made some excuse and left, so I thought, in for a penny, in for a pound. I decided to just go with the group.

The trouble was, I had no sense of direction and if I got detached from the group, I would be in all sorts of trouble, and this panicked me. My plan was to stay as close to the group as possible, without seeming too 'clingly'. There was discussion before we left Goldsmiths. We were to meet the rest of the protesters at LSE, and progress from there.

Suddenly, we were off. People separated more than I wanted. I had no idea where we were going. I kept an eye out, and followed who I could. Getting to the tube, I embarked, and I was wearing my backpack. I have no idea what I had in it. For some reason I didn't get a grip on anything on the tube to steady myself and when the train pulled away, I ended up flat on my back!

Mortified. I lay there thinking could this get any worse? Luckily, the people I was 'shadowing', gave me a hand up. I thanked them and got hold of something. Somehow, I managed to identify our group,

who I was keenly following as I had no idea where the LSE was. And sure enough, we met up with a group there, and carried on.

At some point we went into a bar, but this was different to any bar I had been in. Everyone in it were wearing suits. We looked quite out of place. I had a short exchange with a businessman who was sat at a table. None of the others seemed to engage with the 'suits'. I told this chap, we were from Goldsmiths, and going on a protest march against the war, which he seemed to find quite amusing.

Then we were off. More marching through the streets. Lots of loud halers and placards. Lots of walking. We got all the way to the houses of parliament and stood on the green, well, protesting. Someone was giving a speech, and some animated hairy chap next to me seemed to enjoy it. This went on. I'm not sure if people had dispersed, or if I had just had enough. But it was obvious now that any group from Goldsmiths was no longer identifiable.

If I were to get back to my room, I had to figure that out on my own. Sometimes miracles do happen. I don't quite know how, but I found a tube station, and I eventually got my way back to New Cross Gate.

On one of the trains there was a man who looked a little like a train spotter, he had a big grey overcoat on and glasses. He said hello. Me being me I said a friendly hello, then things got a bit weird. He sort of looked at me and smiled a bit wrong and I suddenly thought you moron, you're in London, who know how freaky this bloke is? Do one, quick.

I got off the train at that point, no idea if I needed to or not. I think he followed me off, and I legged it. But eventually I got back home. And all this just for a pretty Irish girl.

Being there at London, at Goldsmiths, did things to me. Not good things, I turned into some kind of asshole. And yes, I can be an asshole, it's not that hard. It got the better of me, I became arrogant.

Very egotistical. I do not like the person I was back then, and I think none of the people I knew liked me much either. If you would ask anyone who knew me back then, they would likely say, oh he's an asshole.

I can remember once, some random woman knocked at my door in halls, asking to use the toilet, I took offence as I thought it was a bit private and said no., I have no idea what really made me say no, that poor woman just needed a wee, what had I become?

I am not happy with myself. The disabled art student down the hall obviously heard this encounter and took a strong disliking to me.

I can remember once he was talking to someone, and I came up in the conversation and he shouted 'asshole' so loud I could hear it in my room.

I had my birthday in halls that year. I don't think I mentioned it to anyone, I didn't think they really liked me. I was not feeling good, it was all getting to me. Of course, this meant too much booze.

So, I went down to a local shop and got eight Budweiser's and a bottle of Chivas Regal scotch. Over the course of the evening alone in my room, I drank those eight beers, and polished off the bottle of Scotch, bless him, he was feeling sorry for himself.

Of course, with all that booze, I got to sleep ok. It was the waking up that was the problem. I remember being aware of myself in my bed, but all was not, ok? It didn't take long for me to realise I feel very ill

indeed.

I thought, here we go, you've finally got alcohol poisoning. I lay there for a while, knowing full well that a hangover like this won't pass quickly. Eventually I needed the toilet, this was not going to be easy.

I went into the cubical to sit on the toilet, and like some fountain I projectile vomited in the sink about three feet away and out the other end as well. It was a mess.

When I felt safe, I crawled back into bed. And I think I stayed there for most of the day, God only knows what I had on that day, but I was not going anywhere.

It took until the early evening to feel human; I needed food. And fresh air. I took a walk out and got some chips and a saveloy and took them back to my room. But I still had not learnt the lesson with drinking.

Sometimes Alex and I and co, would go to the cinema in Bexleyheath. I can remember once getting the bus back to halls after the cinema, I was stood at the bus stop and two blokes bumped into me quite heavily, they said 'sorry mate', then pursued a third bloke and proceeded to beat him to a pulp. Right there, in front of me, at the bus stop.

Considering their behaviour, I was quite pleased to get a sorry mate out of them, why show me respect?

One time Dan, Eric, someone else, and I went for a drink at the local Brockley Barge, as it was called, just down the road. Of course, if it involves beer I'm game. We arrived, went in. I had never been to this pub before, was not familiar with it.

Looking around at the area, there was blood on the bar, and on the carpet. I thought well there has obviously been some trouble. But I came for beer, so tried to order some at the bar, at that point a policeman came up to me and said look, we need to close the bar, someone just got stabbed. I was a bit shocked really, that sort of thing, well where I come from it didn't happen. We walked back, unsuccessful and the other person that was with us said, welcome to London.

There was a Portuguese chap with us in halls, a nice bloke. I rarely saw him but now and then he would pop up. He came to my room one night and tried to show me an empty book, I said, but there's nothing there, he said that's the artists intention, you have to make it up. Oh, I said. And thought to myself, how lazy.

He worked just down the road in Brockley, at the pizza place. Sometimes we went down there as there was a DVD video rental place. It was a privately owned one, and the people at the counter who obviously owned and ran it were comically pretentious. We perused the shelves a few times and selected the odd film. I think once we got out Dr Strangelove, but I misspoke and called it Dr Strangeglove, and he looked at me with disgust.

The computer labs in the psychology department, well there were a couple, the largest was upstairs, and we were in there quite often, at the PC's trying to use SPSS. I sat at the back one day, Alex was not with me. I logged on to this PC and noticed it was running a bit slow, on further inspection it was downloading lots and lots of hardcore porn.

Instead of just moving to another computer I was determined to sit right there, so I set about cancelling all the downloads and getting to work, it took some time. And yes, I do wonder sometimes if that

bloke was right, could I be a psychopath?

During the end of the year, we had a three-hour statistics exam. I never got on with statistics, remember I didn't even have GCSE maths, and to this day I probably couldn't get it. I had no clue about statistics whatsoever, or maths.

Alex, who had come to Goldsmiths after attempting to study at Birkbeck, he was studying physics, but switched to psychology, so he knew some maths. I sat there in my statistics exam and must have filled out about four books in total of what must have been mostly rubbish, just hoping they would pass me for effort alone.

I don't eat breakfast, and the exam was in the morning. After all that mental effort, I needed a drink. Alex and I and some friends from the course went to the local pub and drank, and of course I drank too much. I remember one of the mature ladies asked me if Mortal Combat was ok for her kid to buy, I just say yeah, of course.

So, on an empty stomach I drank and drank. I had worked hard, I deserved it. Eventually I needed the toilet, so I went upstairs to the cubicle and managed to lower my pants and take a seat. I realised suddenly that I couldn't see anything, my vision had nearly gone. I became aware that I was much more drunk than I had thought I was downstairs, it really had caught up with me.

Sat on the toilet, half blind, I projectile vomited all over my own legs. I must have been in there for too long as eventually Alex came in and asked if I was, ok?

I opened the door, and he could see the mess, he went and got someone from the bar, who was not happy at all with me. I got up, my vision slightly better. Alex made excuses, yet again. And we left.

We got to college, just to the road down to Brockley. And Alex asked if I was going to be, ok? I dismissed this, and made my way, covered in sick, half blind, back to my room.

Alex had consistently nagged me about my excessive drinking the whole time I knew him. Me being an alcoholic, I took serious offence to this. I needed it to cope, it was sensitive. I thought for an intelligent person, he was being stupid, it was clear I had a problem.

I was so angry at it all that one night when Alex came to stay with me in my halls he said something that irritated me and I reacted badly. I think he said something like, why don't you ever ask anything about me?

I don't know why I didn't, or why I needed to, I tended to just take people as they were, without too many questions, but he obviously felt he wanted some more attention.

Don't forget I'm autistic, neither of us knew this then. I was frustrated with what I mistook as an egotistical question and said something I was to regret very much. My answer to him was, 'because you are boring'. I think that did some damage, I felt almost immediately like I had crossed a line and made a mistake I can't undo.

Poor Alex had to spend the rest of the night in my room after I had insulted him, and by and large he had always been so nice to me. I really was an asshole.

From this moment on, nothing was the same. We still were together, kind of. I remember trying to apologise at some point, we had a large argument in Lewisham, people were watching. I wanted to undo the damage I had done, but sadly sometimes you do things, you can't undo.

I had sat my first-year exams and got the results. Which were not very good, but I passed and could go on to the second year. Here again I found myself in the same position as in Aberdeen, where do I live? This is London, and it's expensive. None of the Americans would want to live with me, I don't think I even asked. Alex was living with his parents, but of course now, he would not want to live with me.

I looked at a bedsit once, it was very small, and very expensive. Considering I was so anxious socially that I could not bring myself to go and get a haircut. I took to shaving my head. I had to accept that if I wanted to progress through the second year I would need to live with other people.

So, I looked in a local paper. This was very hard for me. I saw an advert, said good broadband, reasonable price, just by Lewisham on Shooters Hill Road. I gave them a call, spoke to Ding. Arranged a visit.

I met Ding at the bus stop, he seemed very strait laced and mature, but I had to be very open minded, and as it turned out, so did they. We got to the house, and he showed me my room, the house was on a large very smart estate, it was quite upmarket.

The room was large, and for the first time in my life I had a double bed. It looked good for the price, and I needed it. So, I made the right noises, and to my surprise he didn't reject me. As I left, as the door was closing, I just saw Ding, and his friend Grace, put their heads together in the hallway. They knew I was odd. That I would not fit in, but they gave me the room anyway. I am grateful for that.

So, I started living there, with Ding, an ex-Birmingham medical student. Grace, an accountant. Graces friend, another Chinese girl

but I don't remember her name. A tall south African bloke who was a civil engineer and another bloke who was an art teacher. All these people were professionals, and there I was, a second-year student.

All I had to do was pay the rent and do some cleaning. They were nice to me. I was not unpleasant to them, but I had my problems, and I really was very different to all of them. Comparatively I was very immature. I was no professional; I was just winging it in London.

The house had three stories; Ding was in the garage to make room for more boarders. Grace and her friend were on my floor and our South African was just upstairs, along with the teacher.

The gentle South African introduced me to Rooibos tea, he said his mother sends it from home and it was delicious. I've had it since, but what I got was not as nice as his.

I was still seeing Alex at this point, we had sort of survived, but things were not ok. I had introduced a rot into our relationship, I was sure Alex was playing mind games with me.

One thing I noticed about my new house was that I never ever once saw any alcohol there. Not in the fridge, or anywhere else. Of course, being an alcoholic, I can't live without it.

I used to take booze to my room, but disposing of it was a problem, they would see, they would know. I used to go into Lewisham to the supermarket and buy very large bottles of cheap cider and take them back to my room and listen to Elvis on my headphones.

At one point I even started smoking again, I had to go outside for that. I heard on of the 'neighbours' remark that I looked like I came

from the local prison. I didn't fit in here either. The whole area was so quiet you could hear a pin drop, all the time.

Always so sober and quiet. I can remember at the later point of being there we had an 'eye' doctor live with us, and the car parked outside made me feel very small.

But even though I didn't fit in at all, they were all nice to me. I was grateful for that. I won't forget that. We may have been different, but I behaved myself. I just, in a very different way now, felt even more like a fish out of water.

I used to get the bus to the large Sainsbury's out in Woolwich, they did a good pizza I liked. The others didn't eat pizza. I used to get some brioche bread there too, which I very much enjoyed. Oh and cider.

I remember once coming back with several bags of shopping on the bus, I was feeling very low and very anxious, and it took everything I had to not burst out in uncontrollable tears right there on the bus. I had to stop myself crying or I would lose all control. I was so very stressed out.

The second year was not like the first year. In the first year I had collected about seven textbooks and taken extensive notes from them on anything and everything relevant to what we were studying. I had a word processor document that was roughly 25k word of notes.

I could cope with the reading in the first year. But in the second, we got reading before lectures, after lectures, before tutorials, all sorts. It quickly overwhelmed me, and I could not face it all. I was drinking too much, and not reading enough, and it all just piled up on me, it

was a disaster.

In the first year we had to write an extended essay, about 10k words and I thought I did ok with that. But all these journal articles and references just kept coming. And I had to remember a lot of it for the second-year exams.

I had had contact with my tutor since the first year. A very nice lady called Karina. I was honest with her; I knew I would need her help, so I didn't pretend to be something I was not.

I told her I used to work in a yogurt factory but didn't think yogurt was all that important and wanted to better myself. She found that amusing. I had told her about having mental health problems, I got to see a counsellor once, but it was a long wait, and I've never gotten on with therapy. I think I only had one session.

I had told Karina that I was struggling with the reading, and we also had to do a project and sort of a dry run for our third-year project. The prospect of this was very daunting to me. I would have to get people to do my experiment. How? And what if no one wanted to? And what experiment, and how do I do the statistics, I barely understand them. I had suspicions that I had bitten off more than I could chew in the first year, now it hit home.

Karina was a very nice person and did help me with my statistics, but in the end, I had to let her down. It was not just the project that I was struggling with, I had done almost no reading for the most part of the year. It was piled high, and I knew with how slowly I read, I could not get through it in time. I was faced now, really for the first time with the very real prospect it was all coming to a sad end.

The stress was extreme, I think I came close to a real nervous

breakdown. One day I returned home for a holiday, and I just never went back. I told Ding and Grace I was not coming back. Mum, I think, didn't realise that when I came home that time, that was the end. It was all over.

I got letters about attendance, I felt I should call them, someone offered me to put it off for a year, but I knew mentally I was finished, I had to quit.

So, I found myself back at mum's house, in the very place I had been trying to escape from for the past three years, with no qualifications other than an A level in psychology. I was right back where I started.

Back Home-

In one sense being back home was a relief, I no longer had the stress of London, or where to live, or exams. But I had lost it all. There was no job I did as such, all the jobs I had were just dead end, lowest pay, manual labour. And for a while I was just unemployed, with the mental state I was in I could not face work.

Most of the people I had known had moved on. I was mostly on my own. With the exception of old smokey. He was still hanging around. But I had realised a long time ago, he was no friend. All he really did was antagonise me, but he was all I had. At least I could drink with him. I have latterly come to realise that it's very likely he is a raving narcissist and psychopath.

All he ever did with me was play games, he thought I didn't notice, but I did, he thought I was more stupid than I actually am. I knew he couldn't care less, but I had no one else really.

A while ago, before university, while I was down on the harbour. I had experimented with religion. I was not brought up in any faith, neither of my parents were religious. So, it had an appeal to me, what was it all about?

And which one out of all of them was right? Being Christian would mean believing in God and I was not ready for that at that point. I needed something a bit more lightweight, so I read about Buddhism. I learned some meditation and became vegetarian and tried to live a Buddhist life.

I went up the hill one fine sunny day to meditate at the ruins of a chapel up there. I could overlook the ocean and be in nature and meditate for as long as I wanted. I tried some loving kindness meditation, and it went very well, must have been the sun, nature, my mood, all in all I came out of the meditation feeling amazing.

I thought, wrongly, I was changed forever, a better person. I walked back to the house light as air, happy. But in a couple of hours this faded, I returned to my normal damaged self.

After a while of experimenting with Buddhism I sort of just quit. I didn't want to be vegetarian anymore, could not be bothered with being so nice all the time. I am a broken person; I ran out of steam. For a long time, I just left religion alone. Didn't even think about it.

I had known a chap, just down the road from me by the sea, called Mohan. I met him smoking dope once and liked him. Mo was very charming, he was lovely but had a fierce ego, don't dare insult him or he'll get fiery.

And despite being very skinny, he could handle himself. He threw me on the ground once, just playing, but he did it. Mo and his family were a bit different. There was something about them.

They dressed differently; they were different. They were interesting. I got friendly with Mo and we hung out a lot over a period of time. Both with our long hair and funny clothes. Mo was cooler than me, I didn't know how he did it. But I liked him.

Mo's whole family were Osho Sannyasins, this was not something they advertised. They didn't preach to you. You could ask if you wanted but it was really their own private thing. In Mo's very large kitchen, his house was very large, much bigger than mine. There

were framed photos of an old Indian man with a beard.

Someone once asked why he had so many photos of his grandad in the kitchen. It was Osho. In all the time I knew Mo I don't think I saw him meditate, and he very rarely spoke of his spirituality. But there was something powering him that was very different from anyone else. At this point I didn't really enquire about Osho, I just let Mo be Mo, just let it be.

Back to the future –

I was looking for work in mum's new house. Usual thing, look in the local rag. I saw a job advert for dish washer, out in the sticks. Some conference place. It was called Croydon Hall. I had a car somehow at this point, I think mum might have bought it for me.

I decided to call them and ask about the job, I had done dishwashing before.

I used to work for a slightly eccentric lady called Selma in Dunster in her little tea rooms, I really liked her too. She was definitely the boss, quite posh, once chased a non-paying customer down the cobbles with a wooden spoon. She introduced me to falafel; I enjoyed working for her.

I arrived at Croydon Hall one sunny day to see a lady called Kanta, who was going to interview me about the job. I noticed when I greeted her that she was German and seemed quite different to other people. Her manner was very observing.

I entered the reception area, and there on the wall, was a huge, framed photo of Osho. Suddenly it clicked, they were Sannyasins. I mentioned I knew who the picture was of, I had a friend who was a Sannyasin. I described Mo as religious; Kanta quickly corrected me; it was not a religion.

She showed me the hall, and the kitchen. It was a lovely place. A very large building, once the home of a Baron. Somehow, she seemed ok with me, I got the job.

I have never had a job like it before and I would look back at my jobs now and say it was the best job I've ever had, and that is largely down to the Sannyasins. Croydon Hall was a commune, but it was a conference centre for all sorts of spiritual groups.

Sometimes the groups would be small, perhaps 20-30 people, sometimes they would be larger. I worked when they had groups and worked until the group had gone. Some weeks I would work two days, other times I would pull a seven-day week.

Most of the time it was either Shanti, or Tara in the kitchen. I liked them both. Shanti was a slightly dour Scot, but he was gentle and had a sense of humour. Tara, well. She was lovely, but there was sort of a force of nature about her. Tara came to Croydon Hall with her partner Atmo. He was nice too, very quiet. Tara and Atmo if I remember correctly were from the Czech republic.

I met people from all over the world at Croydon Hall. Once someone came to stay and work who could speak seven languages. Out of the back of the dining hall was the garden, which was very large and lovely. Especially in the sun. Shanti often gave me the job of going and cleaning the bird poop off the garden furniture so people could sit outside.

I had to set the tables and keep the refreshments area stocked up. Plenty of fruit, milk, tea and coffee. I could drink tea or coffee if I wanted, and I often took a mug back to the dishwasher area to sip. I got quite into fennel tea there, and fig biscuits.

My area was along a way from the main kitchen cooking area, I had two windows where the sun could come in. And a large sink. And of course, my dishwasher. When you are doing dishwashing for a job, you have to be very quick, but I had practised at Selmas, I knew how

to be fast. There were lots of characters there in the community. And then you had the groups, who could be quite fruity.

At one point some young lad came to stay, very good looking, very cool looking. But I think not so bright. Suchit was his Sannyas name. I remember going into the dinning hall one day and hearing all this screaming coming from the therapy hall. I asked what the hell was going on? And he calmly informed me it was the primal scream therapy group, that's just what they do.

Other groups set up outside 'bath's', so they could do their 'rebirth' groups. Others were all sorts of therapy, some Reiki groups.

I think the Sannyasins just tolerated them as they brought in the money, I'm not sure how into the therapies they were personally. Perhaps some.

Oh, and they did meditation weekends, Osho has designer meditation, many different kinds. They invited me on one of those weekends once, so I went. They docked the cost out of my pay packet. So, I stayed the weekend, up early. Into the hall for meditation, dynamic and later kundalini.

Because I have never slept well, and I was socially very anxious, I had hardly any sleep and found the weekend meditation simply exhausting. I was never very keen on Osho's meditations; I'd rather just sit and get into it.

One night in the dorm when I was staying there, some bloke just across from me had a nighttime routine of popping many pills from various little plastic bottles. In a way, these people were also health freaks. There was a bar at Croydon Hall, but no booze.

They didn't really drink. I found this out once I had made a friend on my meditation weekend, he was a builder from Gloucester. And we had a good laugh. One evening we were sat in the bar, and we asked Kanta if we could have some beer. She looked very serious, but begrudgingly gave us a couple of bottles and then it went away. I think she knew we were going to be trouble.

There were two 'bosses', if you will there. Kanta, and Saguna. Both Germans, but I liked them. I did get a sense that because I was not really one of them, there was some contempt. All these people had their degrees, and here I was having failed mine and now being the dishwasher.

Shanti said to me once, it's not like we think we are better than anyone else, I thought no not much.

There was a nice little smoking hut in the garden that I visited on my tea break. I even took to going in there once I had stopped, temporarily, smoking. They thought that was interesting. I drank coffee though, never really been a fan of tea.

I met an American woman there, without being rude she was on the large size, but not fat, just quite a big girl. She was very friendly with me but kept kicking off with the other members about silly things, always arguing.

I liked her, but suspected she had mental problems. Often that is the case with Osho, people who are damaged and seeking, find him. She had announced that she was celibate, and she was very proud of her NYU degree. We never fell out; we got on well.

A lovely Polish couple of friends came to stay once. One young lady, Suraag, was already a Sannyasin. But her friend was not, after her

staying and working for a few months, she took Sannyas. Suraag was lovely, very warm, kind, and friendly. And pretty. I think she might have liked me, but I don't do girlfriends. We got on very well.

Another older lady, not a Sannyasin, Val I think. She came from New Zealand, again, I liked her very much. She stayed for a while and we got on well, I felt terrible that I missed her leaving do, I was supposed to go back out there in the evening for it, but once I got home, I started drinking and then could not drive. I think I hurt her feelings, and that made me feel really shitty.

The irony is I've had opportunities with many girls over the years, but I just don't make the effort. I don't want a girlfriend, I did have one once, it was a disaster.

There was this older lady Sannyasin that used to come and cook, to give the regular chefs a break now and then. And in all honestly the quality of the food was amazing. All of it, all vegetarian. But delicious. I don't remember this older ladies name now, but she cooked this amazing curry, vegetable of course, it was so good I asked her to pack some for me to take home.

One of the perks of working there was that I got to eat with them for free. The food was so good, I often piled my plate high, having worked up quite an appetite. I saw it was good healthy food, lots of salad and all sorts. There were a few times when they remarked if I had enough food? I loved the food, and it was nice to sit with them.

Now and then some of the Sannyasins did go into town for a cheeky McDonalds, but they were all vegetarian.

Even after all this exposure, still. At this point I didn't really look into Osho, I didn't take to it. I didn't mind it, but I still didn't know much

about it. Even they didn't exactly preach.

Something that was nice was that in the kitchen while the chefs worked there was usually music, we had a little ghetto blaster CD player and I particularly enjoyed Tara's Czech folk music.

Despite Shanti's declaration I did detect an air of superiority from them, the thing with Osho is, they are likely to think most people just won't 'get it'. Of course, I was not really one of them, and I was just the dish washer, so sometimes there was a little snobbery.

I remember eventually when I told Kanta I had to leave and find other work, she was speaking to the chef and referred to me as the little shit. I know enough German to understand that. The irony was that it was not me being snobbish.

Eventually after a couple of years I had to move on. The work was so sporadic with the times the groups were there, or not, and how many days I would work.

All reflected in my weekly pay packet. I think they resented having to pay for someone to do the dishes, but none of them wanted to do it, that was too menial for them. I had a car to run, it took petrol to get out there and some weeks my pay was very low. This was not sustainable.

I had had a great time there, the most fun I have had in any job. It had the best atmosphere. When they knew I was leaving, Tara and Atmo said they would like to get me something from the display cabinet out by reception.

I thought that was very nice. So, I said thank you very much and chose an Osho book. It was all about meditation. I thought very

much at the time that I was not against Osho, but I was not necessarily into him either, I kept an open mind. They never tried to 'convert' me.

The 'other' dishwashing job.

I'm not sure how I did this, but I'd gotten fed up with the work pattern at Croydon Hall and left with no other job immediately to go to. So, the search started again.

I did try to keep an open mind, but after time I ended up applying for another dishwashing job. I went for the interview, got no real sign of any trouble as such. A very different environment from what I was used to. This time it was as nursing home.

The slightly flamboyant chef showed me around and asked questions, I saw it as a steady pay, I wanted reliable pay each week. The main problem I could see with this job was that you had to go back in the evening to finish up after tea. But I decided to just get on with it, rather than keep going on with unemployment.

With the chef as it was it seemed ok to start with, there was one character in the kitchen, and her scrawny mate, the bossy moody lady was called Rose. As it would turn out it was quite inappropriate, and she was very miserable. There was another dishwasher doing the other shift, he was very quiet, I never really got to know him, but he was a nice guy.

After a while of being there, the chef got the sack. I don't know exactly what he had done, but he was gone. They tried a few chefs, one ex-Army trouble-shooter bloke who was a total dickhead. Then they got some chef from one of the pubs, he was awful too.

Eventually old Rose just took over, with her scrawny friend.

I had come from a spiritual place, of light mood and happiness, to this miserable group in a place where people pretty much just went to die. It was so unbelievably depressing. It didn't help that the two miserable old women in the kitchen enjoyed making my life hell. Always shouting at me about taking too long on my cigarette break, which, with my digital watch, I had timed, and I was not taking too long.

Most of the staff could only just barely speak English, they were not exactly all that chatty with the residents, who's alarms were going off constantly and just being ignored. As if all this was not enough, I also had the duty of doing the tea round, which I found very stressful as I could not remember who had tea, or coffee, or milk and how many sugars.

For some of the residents you couldn't even ask them. Most of the people there probably would not be employed anywhere else, it was horrid.

This was the worst job I had ever had; I had hung on at Croydon Hall, despite my predicament, having failed university and being back at the dishes. But Croydon Hall was a happy place, this place was honestly hell.

This is where the real mental health problems began. Of course, to deal with hating my job I was still drinking a lot. I rarely saw anyone. I had come from studying at the University of London, to the dishes, and Rose being miserable all the time in the crappy kitchen surrounded by half dead people. Things couldn't get worse.

I had identified that I had depression as young as 14, I never had

real friends, just acquaintances. Not one of them cared. At 14 I had thought it a good idea to take my life, but I had no idea how. I had been through all this with depression, and up until now I had done ok.

But the situation I now found myself in was the most desperate and depressing of my life ever. And of course, lots of whiskey didn't help either. I lost perspective. I lost hope.

The depression crept up on me over time, increasing. The sadness, the loneliness, the anger at how unfair it all seemed. The rejection, the feeling stupid. Even one of the halfwit care assistants at the home thought I was stupid, which really rubbed it in.

To start with I thought about how I could kill myself. Sometimes I sat with a kitchen knife at my wrist for half an hour, but I changed my mind. I just don't have the guts to go through with something like that. I think I always hoped the alcohol would kill me; I had not investigated liver failure. But the booze was not killing me. I decided to take an overdose of sleeping pills, the thought being that I could go to sleep and not wake up, that was the plan.

But I took the over-the-counter pills, which previously had knocked me out and that is why I thought it would work. I took the whole box, after drinking a lot. And laid down to, as I thought, die. Time passed and I felt drowsy, but I didn't go to sleep, the anxiety of 'what if it all goes wrong' was keeping me awake. Over the night I felt horrid, my whole body felt heavy, it was almost impossible to move.

After a while I realised, I needed to use the toilet, I didn't want my last moments to be in a soiled bed, so I had to get up. It took everything I had to get to the toilet. I only just managed to stand there and pee. Then I went back to bed. Time was passing, I was

now very doubtful that what I wanted to happen was going to happen, I was not going to die.

Now I just had to put up with feeling horrible until the drug wore off. I had not indicated how I felt to mum, I didn't think she'd have much sympathy. It cost her a lot of money to send me to university, and I had failed. And now I was failing at this, I can't even kill myself.

Eventually I recovered, I didn't tell mum about it.

Fairly soon after this, I decided to try and get help. So, I made an appointment to see a doctor to talk about things. I went in to see the doctor, told him I had tried to kill myself and was feeling horrible. He asked me how I tried to kill myself, I told him, and he laughed.

Not much hope here I thought. But just going by the books I eventually got to see a psychiatrist, apparently, he was quite good. When I saw him, he dismissed my suicidal thoughts as 'low mood'. I was very upset.

I had a glimpse of hope to see the doctor, but all that was gone now. The depression developed into a profound numbness. When I was depressed, I didn't want to feel anything, now I didn't.

And feeling numb was much worse than feeling depressed. I began to wonder if I had become a psychopath. I had no feelings, there was no humanity in me at all. It was all very dark. I wanted dark things, I wanted to be surrounded by dark things, I wanted to do something bad.

But really, at my core, I'm not a bad person. I thought about going into town and throwing a brick through a shop window so I could go to prison. But no, that's just not me.

I started looking at very dark things, the trouble with being connected to the internet with serious mental health problems, you can do stupid things. I looked up lots of nasty dark stuff, there were videos of hangings, beheadings. Well, all sorts.

One of the most shocking things I saw was a man in an office, who had gathered his co-workers around him, apparently to make an announcement. He proceeded to pull a gun out of a paper bag on the desk, put it in his mouth, and pull the trigger. And yes, I saw it all, aftermath, and all. At this, I ran to the sink to be sick.

Time passed; all the dark stuff was just making me worse. Part of me thought that I could shock myself back into feeling human, but no that didn't work.

I just needed time; I got my head together enough to stop looking at dark things. I started to get just a little glimpse of hope, try to stay positive. It did take time, but eventually I started feeling normal again. But I was still in a horrible situation.

After some time had passed, I eventually left the horrible kitchen, one day I just didn't turn up. They didn't care. I went back on benefits.

New beginnings? –

It was at this time that mum was having a lot of trouble with her knees, we had stairs up to the bedrooms, and stairs outside to get to the road. Mum could hardly manage it. We needed a bungalow. We looked, but everything there was out of our price range. So, we had to think about moving away. But where?

Mum's brother Harry lives in Ireland, we took a much-needed holiday over to see him, I really needed that. Ireland was lovely, I was still drinking heavily at this point. We stayed in a little place that was self-catered in Arklow, Co Wicklow.

Harry was out in the sticks, still is. One day we went to see Glendalough, it was a lovely sunny day, just a little fresh. Harry had thoughtfully packed a couple of little stubby beers for me. And a Scotch egg. We walked about the area, enjoying the scenery and I took photos.

In the end we decided that we didn't want to move to Ireland, so the search continued. Mum's other brother had recently moved some family to Shropshire, he recommended a town, and we went to look.

We liked it right away, but it took a couple of visits to find the right place. We found a bungalow, on a little cul de sac, both of us fell in love with it from the start, especially the garden.

We had found a place, and in time we moved in, and it was all quite exciting. I had the room at the back of the bungalow that led out on to the garden, it had those patio doors so I could see out and open

them to get fresh air.

It was very strange to be in a different place I had spent so much time in Somerset. Our new town was very pretty, but also very different to where we had been. It took time to get used to it and it took me time to find my way around.

To start with I was on unemployment but after a while, and I can't remember why, but mum and I had a nasty falling out. We were living together but not talking to each other.

Mum can get ideas in her head, and they stick, so sometimes reasoning with her is just futile. I needed to get out, I didn't want to be in all day, so looked for work.

I found a temporary job in a local pie factory, I had done factory work before and thought it would be ok. Starting at 6am. It was quite a long walk to the factory, sometimes in the rain. And not long after they got me in, they asked if I would do 12-hour shifts. I didn't want to be lazy, so I said yes.

Of course, I was still drinking heavily, even more so now I was earning. I was being paid quite well; we did 4 on 4 off. I liked that. But I always turned up with a stinking hangover, then when I had finished at 6pm I went to Bargain Booze and got lots of strong ale.

The repetitive nature of the work, and the speed at which we needed to do it, made my back hurt a lot. I spent most of the shift in pain.

Things were ok to start with, until one of the very large male chargehands took a disliking to me. I went out on a drinking binge with him, but it didn't make him like me anymore. He kept picking on me and playing mind games.

The last thing I needed with a raging hangover, extreme back pain, and a 12-hour shift was this bloke. It all became too much, one day I just didn't turn up. And I never went back.

In time mum and I patched things up, we got on again. But I had not made friends and my experience at the pie factory had made me very unwell. I had a lot of time to think about things. I keep failing, it all keeps going wrong. I can't even hold down a factory job. Add to this the heavy drinking, well.

My mental health got much worse, now I was drinking Irish whiskey, and I was getting through at least a bottle a day, for quite a while. The depression I had had for a long time now was complimented with a profound paranoia. In my mind everyone was out to get me.

I had had so few positive experiences with people, why think anything else? With the drinking the paranoia became very bad. I kept hearing people talking about me, they were very critical. Oh, him, he still lives with his mother, he's pathetic. No one likes him, he's just a failure.

I heard this in supermarkets, and if I went for a walk and heard people talking, they were talking about me. Of course, no one was actually talking about me, it was all just hallucinations.

I remember going on you tube once and looking at Werner Herzog videos and I stumbled on a video of him berating me for being so pathetic. I thought, my God, everyone knows. They all hate me.

There is no such video, it was a hallucination.

But this led me to develop a paranoid fantasy that someone had made a website about me and that there were cameras and

microphones following me everywhere, and in my bedroom. My life was being broadcast for other people's entertainment and they were all laughing at me.

This was all very horrible. It's indescribable how horrible it is to live like this. Mum was aware of the paranoia. She tried to reason with me, but I was having none of it. I strongly believed I was right.

I was truly living in what my friend Simon from the seaside town used to say he was living in, a hell realm. It went on and on.

I needed a solution to this. I mentioned my fantasies to a local social worker, and they had contact with the mental health team. But there was not so much they could do. One evening, I was brighter than normal. Mum had remarked on my mood, I offered to help mum with some of the cleaning, she was surprised. The reason I was so chirpy was that I had found the solution. I was going to try and kill myself again.

The Mental Hospital

I had recently been prescribed anti-psychotic medication and my plan was, as I had not started taking them yet, to take the whole months' supply at once, and hopefully that would kill me.

I finished the cleaning, and got on to drinking, lots. To prepare myself for what could be a very difficult time I watched Scorsese's *Bringing Out The Dead*. Once the film had finished, and a bottle of whisky was gone. I set about taking the whole supply. This time going to sleep was not hard.

I was rudely awakened by a paramedic sat astraddle me on my bed. For once mum had come in to check on me in the morning as I was sleeping much later than normal. She had seen the empty pill packets and called an ambulance. I can remember thinking that this paramedic was just getting in the way of my plan, I told him to 'F' off, and tried to hit him. Then passed out.

I don't remember the journey on the ambulance. I do remember becoming conscious at hospital. Mum was there talking to me. For some reason I couldn't open my eyes. I tried to talk, but just demented noises came out. At this point all I wanted to know was, am I dying? I tried to ask, but no words could come out. I remember being very grateful to the person who was swabbing my mouth with a wet sponge, it had become very dry.

For three days I drifted in and out of consciousness, I knew now I was in the hospital, I could see. I had a catheter installed. But now and then needed water, so would get up and take the whole lot with

me to a sink and drink.

I don't remember really feeling too bad, but I was mostly unconscious. After a while some bloke came up to me and said, we're going to send you to a hospital, it's like a normal hospital but a bit different, if you won't let us, we'll make you. Here we go I thought, they are sending me to the nut house, and will I ever leave?

I didn't argue, what's the point in getting the police to force me? If I have to go, I have to go. They put me in a wheelchair, and someone ripped the sticky tape off my hand. Mentioned something about a high pain tolerance, then wheeled me to the ambulance transport.

The journey was odd, fuzzy. I was not very comfortable. I wondered what it would be like. But I was still barely conscious. We arrived, I was handed over, and shown my room. I was still very fuzzy and not with it at all. The nurse remarked that they had sent me too soon. I got into bed.

During the night I felt sick, so went to my sink and filled it up. I noticed it was very brown. But I cleaned it all up. I went out to tell the nurse I was sick, and she said she needed to see it, I said it's too late. I think I went back to bed.

They called us from the hall for breakfast, my room had a door with a big window in it. I was not pleased with this lack of privacy. But later thought it could be for observation reasons. We ate together, I was still not very with it.

Over time I stopped feeling so out of it. I had a look around on our ward. There was the nurse's station, which was all boarded off for them to work.

In the centre there were some sofas/chairs. For us to sit on. Just by this there was a coffee/tea station. All the coffee and tea were decaffeinated. Down from this was the nurse's booth, for medication time. And at the top was the TV room.

In the TV room there was some game console that no one really played. A TV and a DVD player. They said they used to have DVDs to watch but people kept stealing them. There was only a few DVDs left. The thing is, I was not in the habit of watching TV, but it was pretty much all the entertainment there was, I was not interested in the Wii.

Looking around at the people on my ward didn't suggest much wrong to start with. But if you then heard them talk, it became obvious. Some people I have no idea what the problem was, but others seemed obviously Schizophrenic. I met a lovely chap there, I'm sorry I can't remember his name.

He was bright, and smart looking, but absolutely barking. His speech pattern was very psychotic. He was convinced the Nazi's were after him, specifically the SS.

They had plagued him for ages, because apparently, he knew the location of some hidden Nazi gold. I used to try and talk to him, because I liked him, and sometimes, which I feel a bit guilty about, he made me laugh. He, despite his illness, was usually of good mood. Even jolly.

I spoke to him once and he had just been to see the doctor/psychiatrist. He dismissed the doctor, had told her to her face that her medical qualifications are fake, and she was fake. Then he told me that on the inside we are all made of cogs, and mechanics, and wire wool.

There was another man there, name of Onions. I think he slept most of the day as he used to have his ghetto blaster on all night, and he danced. All night.

There was also a rough and ready character, who I was once convinced he threatened to stab me with a needle, I told the nurse, he got moved for the night, he didn't like that.

We had a boxer with us too, young, of course lean. He didn't want to talk about why he was there. He rarely spoke, once he asked me to help him spell a word, probably because I wore glasses, little did he know, I'm dyslexic and can't spell for toffee.

We had a gym, I used it now and then. But the staff were slow at letting you have a bath or shower afterwards.

One morning we were called to breakfast in our dining room, I went to get my cereal and sat at the table. An older man, with full Santa beard sat on my table. I watched as he proceeded to put marmite on his Weetabix, no milk. And eat. He then complained about all the poop dripping from the ceiling. I looked but couldn't see any.

My friend and I one day were in the computer room, I didn't want to use it before in case I saw my website. But I went in, this was the chap with the Nazi gold. He loved Cary Grant, so we looked up some you tube videos, that made him happy.

We were in the computer room with another chap, and the strange thing about this chap was that he was normal. I have no idea what he was in there for, I don't want to belittle his feelings, but you could hold a perfectly normal conversation with him, and his mood seemed ok. But I'm no doctor, he was on my ward, and I was glad of him, he was a nice chap.

He said he was in a band, and one day his very beautiful Asian wife came in to see him. We spoke and I remember being disappointed when she said I didn't need to be Buddhist, you don't need religion, it's all in your heart. Oh, I thought, but I am not so sure of my heart, I felt I needed something.

There was a little church, just outside our ward, down the corridor with the bedrooms in, just outside the door there. I never visited it, I thought seeing as the devil is in me, don't go to a Church. I wanted to, but there was this block on it. Mentally I couldn't do it, even though I needed something.

I met another chap there, very big, strong. Ex fireman. He got the sack due to making drugs at home, they didn't like that. He'd spent a time in the secure unit as he was violent. But apparently, he had calmed down. He was much bigger than me, but for some reason I was not scared, and we got on quite well.

Among his other talents, he was a graphic designer. I found out when I commented on some colouring in he was doing. Great choice of colours I said, yeah, I used to be a graphic designer, he said.

My ex-Fireman friend had gone to the Church, he was now a born again Christian. I remember being a bit jealous.

We also had a strangely pompous and pretentious son of a Vicar there. He was always on the phone to his solicitor complaining about being sectioned.

He admitted when his Priest father had died, he had steadily made his way through all the homemade booze in the loft. He loved to talk about himself and was very affronted to be here with us.

And we had a Welshman, who disliked his Welsh accent, so had de learned it and now spoke in received pronunciation. My theory with him was that he was so pretentious it had sent him mad. He never watched TV, as that's what they want you to do. I saw him once, outside, meditating. I think he needed that.

There was an older man, who at first seemed ok, but once you started talking to him, you could tell he was not all there. Some kind of northern accent, a gentle chap, I didn't object to him. I can remember once; he came out of the shower to the nurse's station to tell them he'd done a jobbie in the shower. I had thought they would clean it up, but when I went for my shower, there it was, and it was a fine jobbie.

One evening there were several of us in the TV room. I suggested watching a film, there was not much choice, but by chance there was a copy of 'Chopper'. I recommended it to my friends, said it was a good laugh. So, we watched it. And it was a good laugh. They loved it, and for once we had an almost normal evening.

Sometimes in the evening the paranoia was too strong to go into the crowded dining room, so I just snuck in and grabbed a sandwich, I once had a ham and tomato sandwich, and I was so hungry I even ate the tomatoes and I hate tomatoes.

In the evening we would all be called to line up for medication time, I didn't mind as the meds I took made me sleep, which helped. There was an African woman there who was keen to see we respected her. Some people got a bit funny at medication time. They didn't like taking the pills.

I would often wake in the night, and fearful of the night I would lock my door. But less than five minutes later the night orderly would

unlock it. I think I was on suicide watch. And just how would I do it?

Some days I felt so bad I literally stayed in bed all day. Other times I would take a walk outside in the grounds. Shelton was a big old Victorian Asylum; it was very pretty. But the grounds were often muddy. Mum would occasionally visit, and sometimes we would go out to town, I could eat in the café, or sometimes a pub. But I didn't drink, due to the meds. I didn't want to get sick.

We went out once to a café, and I had been getting some horrible side effects from the meds. I kept getting very lightheaded, dizzy. And it happened in the café, out there in public. I let it pass and said nothing to mum, or uncle Harry. I did tell the nurse when I got back.

We were allowed out, but my sense of direction was not good. I didn't want to get lost. Towards the end of my stay, I used to get the bus home for a night.

Someone kindly showed me where to get the bus. On the way to the bus stop we had to walk past the anger management block, I was always pleased to see it empty. It scared me. So did the ECT suite in the hospital, I think I prayed they wouldn't use it on me.

A lot of the time I was very bored in Shelton. I had no beer. No PC. No smartphone, I didn't have one then. Just the TV room. I did speak to mum now and then; she was always nice but had said she didn't want me to come home yet. I took offence at this and reminded her I was in a 'nuthouse'.

In all I was only there for about a month, there were people there on a long-term basis as they had nowhere to go. In the last part of my stay, I kept bothering the psychiatrist to let me go home, but she wouldn't until she knew my meds were ok, that took time. Towards

the end I was told they were going to get the early intervention psychosis team in to see me.

I needed them before I could leave and go home. I called them the 'Ghostbusters'. They sent some young social worker, he was nice, but I didn't think much of him. And they sent a lady who I did like, she had something about her. I took to her straight away. It was her who gave me a lift home on my final day. I don't know how mum felt about it, but I was glad to be back.

The trouble is, this is when the trouble started. The initial elation of getting my freedom back quickly turned into a very deep depression. I literally spent months and months in bed, in my pyjamas. Not sleeping, staring at the wall.

Very rarely eating, not washing. I had contact with the EIP team, they visited, I got out of bed for that. I wish I could remember my mental health nurses name (Michele). I had her looking after me for a long time and she was awesome. Despite the situation she was always cheery.

After some time, the contact with the EIP team was taken away. They seemed to think I had improved a lot, and over a long time, eventually I did get better.

I had been through a lot and was still very poorly. There was no chance of me working. I saw the psychiatrist, who was lovely. And he let me change my meds to something that didn't make me so sleepy. I kept getting brain shocks from the Prozac, so switched to Mirtazepine, that helped me sleep at night.

Now there was some normality, I drifted along for a while. It's hard to remember much of this period.

Autism –

Just as mum had done with the dyslexia, saw a TV programme on it, thought it applied to me, I got diagnosed. She saw a programme on autism and wondered if it applied to me?

She approached the good doctor Malcolm who agreed to see me and then send me to a specialist. I went to the hospital to see the consultant psychiatrist, and after being with him for only about 20 minutes, off I went. He said he thought I was autistic and would write to my doctor. I was not 'very' autistic, but I was autistic.

To start with I thought very little of it. I was not sure I agreed. Even though technically I had spent about three years studying psychology, I still knew next to nothing about autism. Over time, I looked more into it and started to see how it could have affected my life.

I heard about what it was like and how other people have struggled and was amazed that I could relate to it. Now I accepted it, now I had some reason for not 'fitting in'. For being odd.

No wonder there was so much rejection in my life. It did take time to get my head around it. One of the things autistic people can struggle with is personal insight. So being autistic, and psychotic. I really didn't know who I was at all. But then I never have.

I started wondering why I had specifically struggled so much with maths at school, as I felt I was not totally stupid. I found out about dyscalculia, lots about that made sense too. And I discovered that

often with autism and dyslexia, attention disorders were common.

As a child I had been diagnosed as hyperactive, I used to throw fits of rage because I felt this overwhelming irritability.

They took me off all dairy products when I was young, I was not allowed sweets, or coke. I existed, quite happily, on Murray Mints and 7UP as they had the least E numbers in them.

When I went to a children's party, one of my childhood mate's birthday parties, I had to bring my own food. But according to mum I never moaned about it.

I initially had a challenging time with the benefits system. I had to go and explain myself a few times. But in the end that settled down. I had learnt that often autistic people are unemployed. In my experience being autistic makes me very anxious in social environments.

Taking note of all this information took time. But eventually I realised that me going to university in the first place was probably doomed. Getting a degree is taking on more than I can really handle. But back then I had no reason to think anything but that I were normal and just like anyone else.

I gave up smoking about four years ago, but to this day I still struggle with alcohol. I am currently sober, but have just been on a weeklong whisky binge, that gave me a hangover that lasted a week. If I am sensible, I will stay sober.

Booze just ruins everything. A couple of years ago I was diagnosed with fatty liver disease. I investigated liver failure; I can't handle that. It's awful. As my nice psychiatrist said to me, I wouldn't wish it on

anyone.

Dorset -

I had been on an even keel for some time. And I started to think about my dad. I had no contact with him in about ten years. Mum very infrequently had contact with him and had his address in Dorset. He'd moved to a little town called Blandford Forum.

I didn't know much about Dorset, but mum said he used to go diving there as a teen. I had an email address, and I was very much in two minds about this, considering all he had done, and how he had treated me and mum. But I thought, perhaps he's changed? You only have one father.

I got in contact with him, he wrote back. We got chatting, it seemed quite friendly. Over time we Skyped and eventually he invited me down to stay. But how do I get to Dorset? Get the coach he said, me now knowing I was autistic and how I would feel about a long coach journey I thought, nope, I don't want that.

But here where we are we have an aunty Lin, who regularly goes to Dorset to visit her family, so I asked her, and she said yes, she would give me a lift. So, it was arranged, and I went to visit dad several times.

Lin and I met dad at his large local Tesco's on the outskirts of Blandford. I said goodbye to Lin as she went off to her family and drove back with dad to his flat. It was a nice flat, quite big. Just on the outside of Blandford. The flat was cluttered, stuff everywhere.

Dad often complained about his fridge, he said he bought the wrong

one, the freezer was on top, and the fridge below, so he had to almost get on his knees to get stuff out. He said he knew it was the wrong decision when he bought it but bought it anyway.

Dad had a cleaner who he was forever falling out with, as she would move things around in his kitchen and he had told her to leave the kitchen. But dad was always falling out with people, that was dad. He did work at the local museum, but he fell out with someone there.

Mostly he was not in a bad mood. His habit, and I found this strange, was watching the BBC news channel all the time. Even though it repeated itself, he 'didn't want to miss anything'.

I remember mostly sunny days in Blandford, I became quite fond of it. On a sunny day dad and I would often walk into town to the Crown, and sit outside, they did a very good cider. There was another pub just up the road by the Morrison's, dad said he didn't go to it often as the owner was a nutter.

One day we were sat out in the sun, drinking at this pub, on the table outside and dad pointed out someone local. He told me he was a nutter too.

Another time sat outside the Crown, some bloke came and sat down by us, and dad paid him no attention. This bloke eventually said, Hello Jack. Dad then acknowledged him, this bloke then said, you ignorant git. Obviously, someone dad had taken a disliking too. There were many.

Once we drove out to Bournemouth and on the way, he cut someone up on the roundabout, his friend told him, and his response was 'I did no such thing'.

Dad was a law unto himself. He once took me on a tour of the local posh school, little did I know that if you didn't attend the school, you were not allowed on the grounds. I think dad knew this, but he didn't care, we were stopped by a security guard, who said is your son a pupil at this school, to which dad said, 'no'.

And the security guard said, well I'll have to ask you to leave immediately then. So, we did, dad didn't want trouble, he may have been a law unto himself, but he was also a coward.

They were doing construction work at Chestnut House where dad lived, and the main archway into the flats was filled up with work stuff, he had been given a time when he could come back in. But he wanted to come back in now, so he stopped the car, got out, moved all the work stuff out of his way, and drove in to park.

We went to a posh hotel at Sandbanks once, walked in, ordered expensive drinks, sat in the sun. Then he told me, we shouldn't be here really, it's only for the guests, but they won't know.

At this point dad was not drinking much, he was quite sensible. I was the heavy drinker. He always wanted to go home before I'd had enough, so I went to the supermarket and got more beer to keep in his fridge. All my food/beer, I had to pay for it. He never offered once. The booze is understandable, but if I wanted food, I paid for it.

Despite all his faults dad was a good cook, he got that from his mum. He did us his risotto one night, and yes it was delicious. We also went to the local Gurkha restaurant; they were stationed nearby. You could smell the Gurkha restaurant from dad's parking lot, it was yummy.

Dad used to go to bed early, he didn't sleep well, and despite no

longer needing to, he got up very early. One evening about 6pm I suggested a drink in the pub, he seemed grumpy, he didn't want to go. We did go, but he was miserable. Then he went to bed after.

Dad used to sleep with his radio on, Radio 4 all night. The trouble is he was a bit deaf, so it was loud. I said to him, but what about your neighbours? He said, tough luck.

Dad used to like to constantly bother his MP, he always had issues to argue about. I'm sure when dad died, his MP was relieved. Dad used to say he was like a 'sniper'. He really thought highly of his abilities. Unfortunately, the University of Bournemouth had been good enough to give him a degree in something like countryside management.

This only made him worse, now he was convinced he was clever. Despite the degree, dad's favourite subject was Physics. He liked to think he knew a lot about it. But to be fair dad's maths stopped at about basic engineering levels and even that was back when he was a teen. He had no formal education in Physics.

He liked Richard Feynman. Dad once tried to explain some physics to me, and he noted that his ideas should be in the Bodleian library. Dad had a chip on his shoulder.

Dad also liked Richard Dawkins and had got on the whole new atheist thing, you know, you're not intelligent unless you're an atheist type thing. One of his heroes was Christopher Hitchens.

Dad had books, lots of books on shelves. All around the flat. I inspected them, there was quite a variety. But nothing that really interested me. He did have a biography of David Cameron. Not that I want to make the same mistake as dad, but I didn't rate his books.

What made me laugh is in his will he wanted to leave them to Bournemouth University for the students. I remember thinking this was odd, as none of his books were academic.

On dad's side of the family, all the men had bowel cancer. Some died, some were just wounded. But all of them got it. And in the end, so did dad. To start with he went in to have some polyps removed. He complained that they didn't give him enough food. But he made a full recovery and was in the clear after that.

Dad always said he was vegetarian. But he ate fish. He was a fish freak. Someone once tried to tell him he wasn't vegetarian, and he just argued with them. He had never heard of pescatarian. He, now later in life, had developed an interest in Buddhism but as I knew him, this could only ever be vain and vacuous. There was not much love in dad's heart.

While I was back in Shropshire, we used to Skype every night. Or rather early evening/afternoon. Sometimes it would go ok, other times dad just hijacked me and ranted at me for half an hour.

No thought as to if this was interesting to me. Or did I really want to hear it? I was going to hear what he had to say, and that was that. Sometimes I told him I wanted to take a break from Skyping as I was fed up with him, he could never understand why?

Dad used to go for regular checks at the doctors for his blood thinning medication. He liked harassing his GP. Dad often took his GP books, you know, to enlighten him. Dad once said that doctors work mostly from a handbook, they are merely technicians. He had no respect for them.

Before I got in contact again with dad, after all those years of no

contact, I thought perhaps he's changed, let's give him a chance. He'd changed alright, he'd gotten worse.

As the saying goes, you can't polish a turd.

It was during one of our Skype breaks that one morning the phone went off. We ignored it as it was very early. Then it went off again, we thought probably a scam caller. Ignored it.

Eventually mum answered it, and after a short while talking, she was in tears. I asked what the problem was, and she said it's your dad, he's dead.

His friend who was in America had asked her son to go check on him, when he did he found him dead, of a heart attack. Even though I never had a good relationship with him, and was not too keen on him, it was a shock.

Apparently in the time we were not speaking, his cancer had returned. And he had taken it badly, and taken to drinking, lots.

Mum went down to sort his flat out, with my aunty Jane. And when they got there they said they were knee deep in booze bottles and cans and there were dead mice, which had been squashed, all over the floor all over the flat.

I don't know what he went through in his last days, but he certainly didn't reach out to me. It took them several days of hard work to clear his flat, dad didn't do cleaning. Eventually we sold the flat and mum and I, well me really got the money.

Apparently, dad was not going to leave it to me to start with, but he changed his mind in the end. Despite me then struggling on

disability benefits. Well, it took time. But for me it was nice to not be so poor all the time, I could finally get a good PC.

It did take time for it all to sink in. My dad was not there anymore, he'd been there, for better or worse, my whole life, and now, no more. Gone. Despite what he was like, I felt sorry for him.

Religion?

I took some time to reflect on things. I was in a much better place than I had been before. But I was feeling I needed something. I was still on my own, just me and mum. But I had dealt with being lonely and it was hard, but I was ok.

I started thinking about religion. I had mentioned this to dad, I had told him I might go to Church. I knew what he thought about Christianity and God, but he supported it. He probably thought I was too stupid to be an atheist, and this was the best I could do.

But Christianity seemed a big deal, I knew next to nothing about it. It was not so easy to get into. What would I have to believe? And would I? Then I remembered Osho. Oh, I don't know, let's get some books and see.

So I went on Amazon, bought myself some Osho books, and got to reading.

I didn't know all that much about Osho even then, but I found reading his books mesmerising. They have a knack of making you feel good. Bit like a therapy session with a very nice therapist. He seemed very well read and knowledgeable. It was fun to read his books. And there were all sorts of topics. I thought, you know, perhaps this is me after all?

I never did like the designer meditations; I knew I was not going to do them. But I liked the books. It was clear this person was a rebel.

He was very critical of authority figures, but in my experience most authority figures had let me down, so this didn't offend me. There is a lot to read with Osho, so it kept me going for some time. I remember thinking, I bet there aren't too many Sannyasins in Shropshire!

I would have to travel if I wanted to make friends. Croydon Hall was not an Osho place anymore, ironically there was a place down in Dorset. But really, I'm not into travelling.

I started recalling what a lot of the Sannyasins were like, and I thought to myself, is this me? I had my doubts. But because I found Osho such a good therapist, frankly I fell in love with him.

I was looking around on the internet about all things 'Osho' and found a rare book seller. Always keen to get more books, I made an order. I also ordered a mala, seeing as I was into it.

I got a message back regarding the mala asking what my connection was with Osho? I got into a conversation with a person called Dhanyam and told him how I had fallen in love with Osho and how he had helped me and all that.

We chatted back and forth, I ordered books. And as it turns out, they were based in California, so the books had to come a long way.

Eventually Dhanyam asked if I wanted to take Sannyas? I thought about it, and thought well why not? So, I said yes, and eventually got the paperwork through the post. My new spiritual name was Swami Anand Prakash.

I was quite happy with it all to start with and started looking up flights to go to India where the meditation resort was. But I thought, it's

mostly going to be me, here on my own. I'm not really going to see anyone. I read more and encountered more of Osho's thoughts.

One in particular was difficult for me. With Osho, ideally you would want to live in a commune. This would be a challenge for me, but his ideas on raising children were just odd.

Children should pretty much be a property of the commune, not brought up by the parents as the parents will just burden them with all their 'baggage'.

Right, I thought, but what about all the baggage of the rest of the commune? Surely that's more baggage not less? This whole approach seemed unnatural; I thought it was very important for children to have their parents. And yes, specifically their parents. I didn't like this approach.

And in all honesty, it's not like Osho is free of controversy. There was an incident in America while he was still alive where innocent people were mass poisoned.

If you ask a Sannyasin about it, they will blame Ma Sheela. But in all honesty Osho never stopped this happening and did know about it, in as much, he was complicit. This is deplorable behaviour.

Osho also sexually exploited his followers, and I put it this way as it was obvious, he was the figure of authority. And to my mind, someone who is actually enlightened, well they don't let sex drag them down.

Neither do they lust after Rolls Royce's, of which he had 93. All paid for by the life savings of vulnerable seekers.

No sorry, this person was not enlightened. He was an astute businessman and not much more than a cult leader. This was not for me.

I felt deflated, and I felt stupid. And I had no one else to blame, I had gotten myself into this, but not for long. Now I would leave it alone. So, there I was, on my own again. Still looking. But what for?

Faith....

While I was in the mental hospital, I had said a few prayers. But they were empty, they were just a gamble, my heart was not in it. Time had passed. I started thinking about God. That's what I would need to understand if I were interested in religion.

But there were several religions that believed in God. I couldn't be Jewish because I'm not Jewish. And it's all rather complicated anyway.

Islam didn't interest me. Which really left Christianity. I thought, strangely, it's been here all along, right under my nose, and I've not seen it.

But what is Christianity? Of course, I knew about Jesus, my opinion of Him was always high. But I realised that I really didn't know much about Christianity at all.

I decided that if I wanted to show an interest in Christianity, I would need to believe in God. How can I understand this? They always say, God is love. So, I thought, well God must be good. What if God is really good? Like, the best good? Well, he'd have to be, he's God. Love and goodness, we could all do with more of that.

So, I had opened my mind to the concept that God is good and is love. I thought I can get behind this. This is ok with me. Is this what all those people at Church think?

Well, yes, it is. I thought to myself, you've gambled with so much in

your life, you've gambled with the law, your health, your life. Why can't you gamble on God? What do you have to lose?

For the first time in my life, I actually said a proper prayer. The difference this time was I trusted God, I basically said if any of this is real, help me.

I opened the Bible I had and started some random reading. The integrity and wisdom shone through to me, and I don't think I was even reading the Gospels.

My reading felt guided, I could absorb the wisdom of the scriptures almost like reading between the lines. Something was happening, this was not just reading. I was being guided. I now understand this to be the Holy Spirit.

I decided to go to Church, for the first time in my life when it was not a wedding or a funeral. I started with our Catholic Church as my family have Catholic heritage, but this was not where I should be. After going a few times, I decided perhaps I had it wrong.

I had not given up on Christianity but decided to go to our local Church of England Church. I went into a service, and someone got chatty with me and asked why I was there and all that. No one had really chatted to me at the Catholic Church.

I decided to keep attending services, to start with on Sundays. But later I would find it less stressful at the weekly Thursday service as it was smaller in number.

I got chatting to our Vicar, Catherine. She was warm and friendly, I told her I struggled with autism and get a bit stressed in big groups, hence the Thursday service. And she was understanding. I was glad

to see a woman Vicar, owing to my experience of men, I just prefer women.

I got a routine. Became a regular, met more people. Started staying for a cup of coffee after the service. The people I met were just lovely. I had never met such nice people. I was still finding my feet with my faith, with what it all means.

I was reading and thinking. And I gave it time. I did mention Baptism to Catherine, but said I was not sure yet. It's a commitment.

As time passed, I sort of found my feet with it all, I was so impressed with who I had met. I thought, I'm not much for clubs, but if they will have me, I think I'll go for this. I let Catherine know that I wanted to be Baptised and we arranged a date, it was going to be at the Thursday service I had come to love. I was very nervous; I had never done anything public like this before.

The day came, I got dressed a bit smarter than normal. I don't really do smart. And everything went very well, and there were quite a few of us. And all those very lovely people got me cards and gifts. I will never forget this.

What was in my heart was love. That's God, just love. I not only loved these people, who are easy to love. But I loved everyone, and I even forgave myself for being so rubbish in my life.

What I found in God, was hope. I had looked and looked for hope my whole life and never found it. I felt for the first time a sense of peace. I believe this to be a gift from the Holy Spirit.

Things went on nicely, Thursday service. Some time had passed since my Baptism. And one night I lay in bed and asked God, but

what if I stopped believing? What if I changed my mind?

I slept well that night, which is very unusual for me. And I had the most vivid dream I have ever had. I don't usually feel too much in dreams, but this was not usual. I dreamt I was pregnant, but somehow, I lost the child.

This is controversial as I am a man and cannot be a mother, but the pain I felt at losing my child was overwhelming. I had never experienced pain like it.

I woke up, and it was morning. I never usually sleep through until the morning. I sat up, on my bed. Again, I don't do this, I get up. I was sat there, and I noticed an unbelievable sense of love and wellbeing. I have done many drugs, even I have had sex, I have been drunk. And at times I have been happy.

But never have I felt such love and happiness in my life. It was honestly profound.

I didn't tell mum, other than I was in a good mood. I thought she'll just think I'm nuts. So we went about our morning, usual routine.

But all of it was so delightful. We went shopping at Morrisons, and I felt nothing but bliss. We came home, again, the mood lasted. I spent all morning like this, I think it sort of faded into the background in the early afternoon.

This is how I see it. First of all, God showed me the pain He feels when one of His children turn away from him, hence me feeling the loss of my child. And imagine how painful it must have been for God, to lose His only Son?

So, where I had wondered, what if I stop believing? This is how it would make God feel.

Also, the happiness or joy that I felt was just a touch of what God has in store for us in heaven. Just a small dose, and I'll tell you. It's very good. Love God, get love back. Get eternal love. What do you think? That's a great deal.

But you may wonder, you may still say. I just don't believe in God. Well, have faith.

It's been about four years since my Baptism now. I now have a group of the best people I have ever met in my life, and I love where I live. How things can change.

But owing to mine and mum's situation, mum now being disabled and due to covid, I have been something of a recluse for several years. Mum has vascular dementia, and COPD. Among other problems.

If I were to be selfish and do what I want, I could bring covid back and that could kill mum. I am trying to be as careful as possible. I am not very sociable, I love my home, I can stay in.

Of course, all this means that for the moment I can't regularly attend Church, it would be too risky. My job now is to care for mum. And I'm not yet sure what that will involve. She get's carers come in the morning, and they have been brilliant.

But I am here for her full time. I have a good contact at the job centre and let's face it with all the problems I have I don't need a degree. My friend Liz will help me find work when it's time to do so.

Mum and I tick over not too bad now, mum is fixated on her word game, which I try to help her with, and so do our carers. I am trying to stay sober, which is not easy. But if I drink it all goes wrong. Sober is better.

I am so glad for video conferencing; over lockdowns and my own hibernation it's been a lifeline to see friends and chat.

I have a lot of time to myself now, sometimes I just 'chill'. But other times I like to try and be creative.

And no, I'm not a writer, or an artist, or a musician. I'm not serious or very knowledgeable, creativity for me is fun, it's play.

Even if I attempt to use grown up topics. It's such a joy to create something, and even more amazing if someone, anyone say's, you know what? I like it.

That is very enjoyable. And what more creative act could there be than to create life? Just think about how much joy a parent feels in their child.

And then think of the joy God has in you. His creation really.

Just as a flower dies without sunshine, a person, or an animal, dies without love.

Having no love in my life nearly killed me.

But of course, people come and go. You will always have the love of God.

If you look at someone and think something like. Middle aged,

slightly fat, Caucasian, bit posh, this and that.

Don't forget that there is a person there. That is not a socialist, or a conservative. It might be someone irritating, but in the end, we are all naked.

Never categorise a person and put them in a box in your mind, you don't know anything about them.

Don't judge. Whether a person's story is exciting or not, that person feels just as you do.

Don't treat people as a means to an end, treat them as an end in themselves. I learnt that from Kant.

My name is Saul Elijah. This is not the name I was born with. I took this name to reflect my new faith. But it is ironic. It means, he who was asked for, my God is YAWEH.

I chose Saul as a name because my mother spent 12 years trying to get pregnant. She had nearly given up and was in the process of adopting, when that all fell through. Mum was going to name her adopted baby, Saul, (he who was asked for).

I took the name to honour what would have been my brother.

I do not know what the future holds for me. But I will try and stay positive now that I have finally found hope. It's all been one big EPIC FAIL.....

Addendum –

Why Be A Christian?

For me, Christianity has the right mix, of the right things. Not to criticise other faiths, all faiths should be respected. But to my mind, Christianity is the path I want. Yes, I do think Jesus is the Son of God, yes I do think following Jesus is the true path to salvation. But I would, I'm a Christian.

I don't want to dictate to others what they should think. Preaching is great for those who are seeking, but if a person has found their path, or at least they think so, only the Holy Spirit can make them reconsider.

I used to be very into Buddhism, and I still use some of its wisdom in my life now, it's very valuable. All of it, but I like the lightweight approach of Zen, or Chan. I don't want to get bogged down in scripture.

But every form of Buddhism is good. I did struggle with the concept of reincarnation, I wondered, if our souls get recycled, when there is a population increase, such as there has been, where do the new souls come from? They can't be made up by those that exist, as there is more of them. But I am no expert in Buddhism.

I think of two things that I felt it lacked for me, one is that I personally needed God. And the other is, I am not clear how Buddhism deals

with evil.

Buddhism is good at dealing with negative mental problems, but can it handle real evil? Perhaps you don't think there is such a thing? How would you explain Nikolas Cruz? The school shooter who showed no remorse at all. He is evil. How does Buddhism explain this?

I think everyone needs three things in life to be happy. Love, hope, and good examples. In my understanding of God, God is the highest possible example of love, and the love God has for us, is beyond our imagination.

Two things, I believe we will experience this amazing love in heaven, and, what better demonstration of pure love than to send His perfect Son to us, who was mocked, persecuted, tortured, and ultimately killed for our redemption? And will you say that you don't sin? Are you sure?

The achievement of Jesus, in making salvation available to us all, is possibly the best message of hope I am aware of. If you can understand a little about salvation, it puts the troubles of this world in the background.

And good examples? What better example will we find other than Jesus and His life? But we will find many good examples around us also, good community leaders, and good people don't have to be Christians.

There are many examples of good people around us, look to them, don't pay attention to the bad people. I think if people are good, they will get their reward in heaven.

They may not have been chosen by the Holy Spirit to lead the Christian life, but I believe we will all get the opportunity when we die to take our spiritual journey by seeing and accepting Jesus.

For those that have been drawn to the faith, what it is that guides us on a good path, is the Holy Spirit.

For all of us baptised Christians, we get a dose of the Holy Spirit at baptism. And that connection lasts this earthly life. But it's a bit like tuning into a difficult radio station, there may be some readjustment and static along the way.

I am certainly not an expert on religions, so I am not aware quite how these topics are part of Judaism, or Islam.

But of course, being Jewish, is being Jewish. You can't quite 'take it up'. And I am not very clear on how Islam see's things. I have found the story I needed in Christianity. The story of redemption, hope, love. Forgiveness, and isn't' this so important?

We all make mistakes, we all sin, we all upset people now and then. The ability to forgive is central to Christianity, and I think it's a necessary part of a good life.

Christians believe that the Devil is the 'tempter', our urge to do something, well, not great. Whether it's drink too much alcohol, or much worse.

Buddhism can deal with this temptation in terms of picturing it as an unhealthy or unhelpful attachment. But I am not knowledgeable enough to understand how it can explain pure evil.

Life is a battle of good and evil. We will all be tempted along the

way, what matters is how we deal with that challenge.

Do we give in and let the negative stuff take over? Or do we fight the good fight, guided by the good, to redemption? And what world would you like to live in? A good world, or an evil world? I know I believe in a good world.

Often the results of being bad, or evil, for us Christians, are interpreted in dramatic ways. You will be familiar with the concept of hell? Punishment for evil.

But what is Hell? Is it a fiery inferno of infinity? What it actually is, is separation from the love of God.

Oh, you may think, that's no biggie?

Are you sure? Do you want your soul to spend an eternity in a loveless empty void? Or do you want to experience the overwhelming love, acceptance and understanding of heaven? It's your choice.

Why God?

Sometimes people reject Christianity on the premiss that they don't believe in God. So, if you don't do God, the rest of Christianity must be false? But why believe in God? Or why do I believe in God?

To Christians God is love, but this is more than any worldly feeling of love, this is an unimaginable love, we believe we will experience this love in heaven. And with God, comes heaven. That's a good deal, isn't it?

But perhaps you don't need heaven, and you are perfectly comfortable with just ceasing to exist. Ceasing to exist is ok if you are a normal person, or a good person. But if we just cease to exist, what happens to bad people? If the whole heaven and hell thing is not true, those people that have been, simply, evil. Well, they kinda get away with it. You might argue that they get their punishment in their life, as most very bad people get caught and will be processed

into prison. But I think there are crimes that are so evil and horrible, that even prison is not an adequate punishment. For justice to be served, more is required. That's what hell is for.

So, in this sense, God acts as the final judge, to sentence those who have been very bad, to proper punishment. God is justice. Most people believe in justice.

But you may still not believe, perhaps you feel prison is a sufficient punishment and maybe you just don't need an afterlife, or the love of God.

If you are lucky enough to have enough love in your life, you may not seek more. And you may feel that it's 'light's out' when we die. If you are lucky enough to have enough love in your life, you are one of the fortunate ones. There are many people who do not. And we know our worldly justice system is far from perfect, many innocent people have gone to prison, they even sent Nelson Mandela to prison.

What if your life were to change? It can happen overnight. What would you do if you suddenly found yourself in a situation where you didn't have enough love and acceptance in your life? The love of God is for all of us, it's always there, despite our situation, and there is more of where that came from. So, God is our great comforter. At some point in our lives, don't we all need this? Don't think of the good times when you are floating along. Think of the very low points, what if you lose it all?

But perhaps you are a tough guy, and you don't need comfort and love. Is anyone really like this? I mean, that is not mentally ill. I'm not sure, but just for the sake of argument. God is more than ultimate justice, or our great comforter.

Most normal people need standards in their life, through life standards are set and they are attempted to be met.

We have an early experience of this at school, but this is not the only set of standards we need to be successful. We need moral standards, and we need character. You don't have to want to be the fat cat if that's not for you. But you will not get very far in life without setting some standards. Your standards may not just be about character, or your morals.

Perhaps your standards are physical? Perhaps you want to be an athlete? You can look to other athletes for your standards and inspiration. But the point is here, you, want to do better. You want to set the standard, you want to beat the record, be the best. So, the higher the standards you set yourself, the more successful you will be.

But who has the ultimate standard? Well, God. God is the ultimate standard setter, the goal and yardstick. We can always do better and improve, but we recognise that some standards are just too high for us, or maybe anyone else too?

If there were not this high example, where could we set our sights? God can drive us forward, like the carrot at the end of the stick, to improve, over time, to get better. And once the race is over, we all get our rewards.

But God is more than this. God is also hope. Perhaps you feel like you have enough hope in humanity, you have experienced good people. But what about those who have been let down? What about those who have experienced bad people?

The unfortunate situation in Ukraine is very relevant here. The good

and innocent Ukrainian people are facing a great evil. And yes, they can take solace in the hope of humanity that other nations and peoples will try and help them as much as possible.

But sadly, some of them, despite this, have still paid the ultimate price. For some, the hope in humanity has not been enough. I would not want to presume whether these people have a faith or not, nor judge them if they didn't have one. But in this dire situation, the hope of God may have been all they had. And you would be callous if you wanted to take that away from them.

As important as these things are, God is still more than this. People love stories, young and old alike. I think of how much joy the Harry Potter books have brought to children and adults both. But what is the story of our lives? Perhaps your narrative is simply that you occupy a role in your job, and in your home, you are the parent, and you are a national of a country that you love and can identify with patriotism.

Is this all there is? We all get put in foxholes at some point in life. And as they say, there is no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole. Well, there may be. But I think most people wonder if there is not 'more' to life? Is all we know, everything? Or is there more? Some people may believe in aliens, or other fantastic things. But there is little depth here.

God gives us a story. Puts us in the middle of a story, it's the story of Jesus, and our relationship with God. We are part of the God story, our mission and identity are to be good Christians, or at least, as good as we can be. To fight the good fight, and to be given justice eternal for our efforts. Isn't that a better story to be part of? That is my story, and as much as I love Harry Potter, this has a better ending.

So, God is many fundamental and important things, can you see the value now? So, why God? Because God is great!

2 Corinthians 12

Paul's Vision and His Thorn

12 I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. **2** I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. **3** And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—**4** was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. **5** I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. **6** Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, **7** or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. **8** Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. **9** But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the

more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

SNOW4MAEN – This site is about my struggles coping with autism and mental health and learning difficulties.